

BOOK

5

寻

黄易

秦记

黄易精品

Huang Yi

A STEP INTO
THE PAST



A STEP INTO THE PAST

BOOK 5

(Volume 21 to 25)

Author:

HUANG YI (黄易)

Original Title:

Xun Qin Ji (寻秦记)

Published by:

Wong Yi Books

Year:

2001

English translation and electronic conversion for this Book 5 done by:

JEAN, YEONGWEE, SKWANDREW, CHOWBENG, & JUSTIN13

Published on:

spcnet.tv/forums

Date:

02 November 2011 – 27 September 2013

Compiling, editing, and formatting by:

jaran saga

Cover:

Cover is modified version of original book cover.

Remarks,

Content of this ebook mostly is copied from the unabridged version posted by
KOHCHUN.

..... the purpose of compiling,
editing, and formatting this eBook is only for my
private collection, for the love and eternity of "Cerita
Silat" in Indonesia, and for providing those who don't
have rupiahs much.....

.....this eBook is not
perfect.....have comments or
correction, please email me.....

Safar 1431H

Jaran saga
jaran.saga@yahoo.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

VOLUME 21:

• CHAPTER 1	Escaping Dragon from Battlefield	1
• CHAPTER 2	Risky Moves	16
• CHAPTER 3	Surrounded by Enemies	31
• CHAPTER 4	Towards Shichun in Secret	45
• CHAPTER 5	Held Back in Reserve	60
• CHAPTER 6	Hard to Move a Single Step	76
• CHAPTER 7	Leisurely Chatting In Forbidden Palace ..	91
• CHAPTER 8	The Song and Dance Troupe	112
• CHAPTER 9	Battle for Power	134
• CHAPTER 10	A Shattered Dream	149
• CHAPTER 11	River Prisoner	163
• CHAPTER 12	Meeting a Friend in Foreign Land	170

VOLUME 22:

• CHAPTER 1	History's Mystery	194
• CHAPTER 2	Going Along with the Plan	210
• CHAPTER 3	Ancient Opera	227
• CHAPTER 4	Knee Deep in Trouble	233
• CHAPTER 5	Staying Against His Will	250
• CHAPTER 6	A Fight To The End	266
• CHAPTER 7	Ancient Capital Lin Zi	279
• CHAPTER 8	Local Villain	294
• CHAPTER 9	Hard to Distinguish between Leader and Follower	316
• CHAPTER 10	Surrounded By Women	334

• CHAPTER 11	Clearing All Misunderstanding	352
• CHAPTER 12	Meeting of the Two Courtesans	370

VOLUME 23:

• CHAPTER 1	She's Married	394
• CHAPTER 2	Unfinished Love.....	413
• CHAPTER 3	Rectifying Misjudgments.....	428
• CHAPTER 4	Evil Upon One's Door	444
• CHAPTER 5	Touring Cow Mountain	460
• CHAPTER 6	Expired Love	474
• CHAPTER 7	The Sword Saint of Qixia	492
• CHAPTER 8	Edge of Death.....	514
• CHAPTER 9	Enemies Are Bound To Meet On A Narrow Road	530
• CHAPTER 10	No More Hiding	548
• CHAPTER 11	Meeting the King of Qi	563
• CHAPTER 12	Dilemma	584

VOLUME 24:

• CHAPTER 1	The Victorious Hundred Battle Sabre	615
• CHAPTER 2	Full Confidence Recovery	632
• CHAPTER 3	Plagued By Gratitude And Hatred	648
• CHAPTER 4	Discovering A Shocking Conspiracy	667
• CHAPTER 5	Unexpected Gains	683
• CHAPTER 6	Separating Gratitude And Enmity	702
• CHAPTER 7	Qixia Sword Meet	722
• CHAPTER 8	Goodbye Kiss	741
• CHAPTER 9	The Grand Banquet At The Palace Of Qi	757
• CHAPTER 10	Farewell Letters	776
• CHAPTER 11	Displaying All Talent	795
• CHAPTER 12	Safely Back At Xianyang	814

VOLUME 25:

• CHAPTER 1	Unpredictable Xiao Pan	840
• CHAPTER 2	Preparing For A Rainy Day	857
• CHAPTER 3	Xianyang Happenings	873
• CHAPTER 4	Hard To Differentiate Real And Fake	890
• CHAPTER 5	Reunion After A Long Split	904
• CHAPTER 6	Thick Clouds Of War	921
• CHAPTER 7	Unorthodox Interrogation	938
• CHAPTER 8	Surprise Attack	951
• CHAPTER 9	The Cruel Truth	965
• CHAPTER 10	The Takeover of Xianyang	981
• CHAPTER 11	Exacting Sweet Vengeance	992
• CHAPTER 12	At The Brink Of Death	1006
• CHAPTER 13	United States of China	1015
• EPILOGUE	1022
ABOUT AUTHOR		1031
LIST OF AUTHOR's NOVELS		1032

The Warring States of China c. 260 BCE



A STEP INTO THE PAST

By: HUANGYI

VOLUME 21

CHAPTER 1

Escaping Dragon from Battlefield

[Translated by JEAN]

JUST as Xiang Shaolong got rid one batch of enemies, a scream came from his side. He turned around in shock only to see Zhou Liang falling over his horse, with a long spear piercing through his armor from the back and exiting to the

front. Obviously the enemy who threw that spear was very strong.

He let out an earth shattering roar and was about to rein his horse to kill his way back but his followers on either side of him tugged at his reins hard, pulling him along as they escaped.

One of the enemy generals, leading a group of soldiers ran after them and shouted, "Xiang Shaolong, where can you run!"

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the surroundings only to see that only less than a hundred of his personal guards are left and the forests around them are all burning bright. He has no idea how many more enemies are out there.

Now that the enemy has caught onto him, it'll be difficult for him to avoid them in this situation. Just as he was about to turn back and avenge Zhou Liang right before he died, there was a shrill screech as Eagle King swooped down from the sky, right into the face of that Zhao general, its sharp beaks pecking at that general's eyes madly.

The Zhao general let out a frightening scream as he abandoned the spear that he was about to throw and grabbed Eagle King with his hands and both bird and human fell off the horse.

Because their general has met with misfortune, the pursuing army was sudden thrown into sudden chaos.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the Zhao general and Eagle King is as good as dead and felt that this opportunity should not be missed as he urged his horse to give chase.

He has just gone out about seven to eight feet when about a dozen Zhao soldiers came up from the left and right, raising their spears as they yelled and stabbed madly at their horses.

His personal guards on the left and right fell, becoming the target of massacre for the enemy.

At this point in time, Strong Wind executed its extraordinary ability and could actually suddenly pick up speed and dash out of the encirclement. Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt that he is all alone.

Hot blood coursed through Xiang Shaolong's veins as murderous thoughts welled up in him. He killed his way past the dozen odd Zhao soldiers who were charging from the left.

Luckily in this dense forest, arrows are of not much use. Otherwise he won't even have the chance to fight before he's taken down by arrows.

Cries and screams surrounded him, the atmosphere was extremely bleak.

From behind a clump of trees, Xiang Shaolong leaned on one side of Strong Wind as he charged into the enemy formation, waving his blade and slashing towards the opposing soldiers.

His target is the one right in front holding the torch and illuminating the path. Hundred Battles Blade slashed diagonally at that person's shoulder and fresh blood spewed immediately as he fell off his horse.

The torch fell to the grass and immediately started burning.

As the enemy were still screaming, Xiang Shaolong's strength seems to increase as he charged into their midst and waved his blade as he chopped and slashed.

The enemy hurriedly pulled out their swords to block him but did not expect their long swords to immediately break into halves as Hundred Battle Blade sliced through with an icy sheen. The Zhao soldiers fell. Xiang Shaolong dispersed the enemy and naturally killed his way towards where the light is the weakest.

By now the enemy has gained an overwhelming advantage. Although there are still skirmishes around him, it can no longer change the situation at hand.

A feeling of fatigue welled up in Xiang Shaolong.

Witnessing the death of Zhou Liang and so many of his men, he had the thought that he will not live alone. He gritted his teeth, turned his horse around as he ran back towards where the battle cries are the loudest. In a short instant he is out of the woods into the open plains.

Amidst the scattered trees, a group of a few hundred Qin soldiers were right in front, surrounded by thousands of enemy and fighting to their last breath.

Fury welled up in Xiang Shaolong as the murderous intent magnified again and he decided to go all the way out, slashing anyone in his way. The enemies who met him only ended up dead in an instant.

The Qin army saw that their Commander has returned and their morale was greatly boosted. Following in his bravado, they actually managed to fight their way out of the enemy's encirclement and ran towards a small hill up ahead.

Just as war cries were rising behind them, the small hill up ahead were suddenly lit with hundreds of torches.

Countless Zhao soldiers swarmed down from the top of the hill, each of them carrying weapons for long distance fighting, which are precisely the weapons that are the bane to cavalry like Xiang Shaolong and his men.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, knowing that Li Mu has covered all bases in his plan and have set up one obstacle after another in the woods long ago with the sole goal of apprehending and killing him.

By this time anyone would know that it is over for them and without waiting for his orders, half of his men started escaping towards the two sides.

Xiang Shaolong could not stop them in time but knows in his heart that the enemy is deliberately forcing them to run towards the south.

Suddenly, he knows very clearly that as long as they can charge their way up to the top of the hill, there'll be a

chance where they can escape into the hilly terrain and extricate themselves from danger.

By now there are only 50 odd men by his side. He immediately shouted, "If you want to live then come with me!"

He kept Hundred Battles Blade back into its sheath on his back and pulled out the flying needles around his waist as he clasped the horse with his thighs and charged, both his hands continuously throwing out needles. The enemy soldiers all fell to the ground as they were hit by the needles.

Amidst the chaos, Xiang Shaolong had thrown out close to a hundred flying needles, until both his arms were numb. By then he had used up all his needles and behind him corpses filled the ground, a distressing sight.

By now only about a dozen odd men was with him but they have successfully gone up the top of the hill.

Hundreds of enemy soldiers were attacking them madly like preying wolves and tigers.

Once again Xiang Shaolong took out Hundred Battles Blade.

By now his body was filled with a dozen odd large and small bleeding wounds but he could not feel any pain at all.

As he waved his precious blade, screams were heard and the corpses of his enemy on the field filled the ground.

Without even looking, Xiang Shaolong slashed behind him and killed another enemy who was coming up on him from the back.

In front of him, a person ran up on foot with a spear and aimed it straight at Strong Wind's neck.

Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to throw his precious blade and aimed it instead at that person's chest and pin him to the ground.

He felt a sudden heart-rending pain behind his shoulder blade, something had struck him.

Xiang Shaolong was in so much pain he collapsed on the back of his horse and his guards risked their lives to charge their way to him and cover him.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking to himself that this is the end.

In that instant, he thought of his beloved wives and concubines far away in Xianyang, and also thought of Lady Ni, Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian and countless people and incidents.

Just at this moment of life and death, he could feel Strong Wind dodging left and right as it kept increasing its speed and ran.

The battle cries were gradually getting fainter behind him.

Darkness was surrounding him.

He held Strong Wind's neck in a death grip, feeling as one with his horse. His consciousness gradually faded and he finally lost all senses.

He regained consciousness slowly and suddenly woke up in shock, only to feel his entire body racked with pain and felt extreme thirst.

He can't help but groan and open his eyes.

The autumn sun hung in the middle of the empty sky.

For a brief moment, not only does Xiang Shaolong have no idea where he is, he's also not sure what had actually happened.

He sat up with much difficulty and was shocked to see Strong Wind collapsed on its side a few feet away, its neck twisted in an unnatural position, its nose and mouth filled with foamy fluids which had solidified.

Xiang Shaolong felt his whole body shaking as he finally remembered what happened last night before he fainted.

Strong Wind had carried him and escaped from the battlefield and sacrificed its own life in order to save his.

Ever since Ji Yanran gave him the horse, he has spent more time with Strong Wind than with any of his beloved ladies.

It's loyalty to him has never changed and reduced at all.

Xiang Shaolong can no longer control his emotions as he hugged Strong Wind's body and cried manly tears!

He has lost.

Lost to the most famous general of that era, Li Mu.

He deliberately picked routes at the cliffs where beasts and men will find difficult to cover and used his climbing gear to move along. This is surely a move that his enemies will never expect. Otherwise if he were to choose to travel on flat open wilderness, how can he ever outrun horses on four legs.

Once it's dark, he rested next to a waterfall, his whole body in so much pain that he can't even move his fingers.

In a short instant he was fast asleep and by the time he woke up the sun was gradually rising.

His ears first heard the swooshing of the waterfall, mixed with the sounds made by insects and birds. The scene around him was serene. Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes and sat up only to see the waterfall on his left coming down from the cliff high above in a silvery cascade, the lake next to him foaming with white bubbles as the water crashed down on its surface, crashing back to the side of the cliff again in tight circles. The scene was magnificent.

He looked at his surroundings again to see countless mountains surrounding the area with trees growing wildly.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but be impressed and wondered why had he not noticed that the scenery here is so special yesterday?

Inspired by the surroundings where opportunities for survival abound, he felt a strong surge of drive and vowed to live to return to the people who love and care for him.

In the past, when he lost contact with Tao Fang at the Zhao border after they ran into horse thieves, there was a period of time where he was roaming around in the wilderness. So now he is of course familiar with it and is able to pick wild vegetables to curb his hunger.

He thought that he may be the first human to ever step foot in this desolate wilderness and a sense of satisfaction welled up in him.

The place where Li Mu ambushed him is around the borders of Zhao and Wei, north of the city walls of the state of Zhao, so it's a higher possibility that he is right now within the borders of Wei. Once he ascends the peak nearby and can have a further look, he would be able to find the easily identifiable Yellow River or maybe the route he took in the past when he went to Wei from Zhao. From there he will be able to determine his plan to return to Zhongmou.

Once he thought of this, his spirits lifted and once he decided on the highest mountain peak nearby, he gritted his teeth and climbed his way up.

He can't help but be thankful that he had been practicing martial arts every day for the past few years, otherwise by now he won't have the stamina to go on further.

But when he saw the wild eagles circling around the top of the mountains, he can't help but be reminded of Zhou Liang who died in the battle and the loyal Eagle King who died for its owner and he could feel hot tears brimming in his eyes.

Are humans naturally selfish creatures? For various gains, they will rally around the excuse of protecting the country and the people and keep on killing one another. What's the point of all these?

What is most hateful is that he is part of such killing wars.

In a war, there's no one who can truly win. Even the victorious will have to pay a terrible price to win.

Such an outcome has been laid down in stone since time memorial and no one can change it but wars are still continuing without a stop.

Even if under a unified power, power struggles and murders have never really stopped.

Before dusk, he has ascended one of the peaks and the great land lay before his eyes.

He was immediately stunned by what he saw.

The remaining light from the setting sun cast a sad yet beautiful glow upon the vast land below as it stretched into the horizon.

Behind it there were grand mountains and cliffs, looking dangerous yet magnificent.

Although he could see a river winding along the valley, he is certain that it is not the Yellow River.

Far away towards the left he could vaguely make out terraced fields on a hilly slope. As it is now autumn, the

harvesting period, the golden fields look especially outstanding when framed against the lush green wilderness.

Behind the hill, smoke was rising from chimneys, and it looks as if there could be a small village of sorts over there.

Xiang Shaolong was hesitant. He was sure he's never been to this place and the only way now is to ask for directions along the way but that may also reveal his whereabouts.

That night, he slept among the crevices of a huge stone and the next morning he tried to look for a route down the mountain. Only then did he understand why there is a saying, 'going up the mountain is easier than coming down the mountain'.

After much difficulty, he finally managed to arrive at the foot of the mountain after noon.

He has finally decided to go to that village and have a look and travelled towards there through the night. By now his clothes are tattered and torn in many places and he has not shaven for days. He looked absolutely like a destitute vagabond.

Although he is on the run, but amidst the wilderness, looking at the rivers and streams with the vibrant yellow and red colors of the autumn forests, the scene is extremely beautiful. The scenic route also helped to elevate his feelings of loneliness.

From the top of the mountain, those chimney smokes looked very near but after walking for half a day, there was still no sight of the village.

Before the sky got dark, he plucked some wild vegetables to stave his hunger and spent the night next to a small lake.

He slept until the middle of the night when suddenly there were sounds of dogs barking and human voices.

Xiang Shaolong woke up in shock and knew that something is amiss. He hurriedly broke off a hollow reed nearby and hid amongst the weeds in the lake, breathing thru the reed.

He had just hidden himself when a team of a hundred odd men came right to the edge of the lake with hunting dogs.

The dogs were frantically sniffing the area where he was sleeping.

He heard someone say, "Xiang Shaolong must have been here and ran away when he heard the dogs barking. If we can capture him this time, just the reward alone is enough for us to spend for the rest of our lives."

Xiang Shaolong heard the Han accent in their speech and was stunned. Now he knows that when Strong Wind ran, he actually brought him within the Han border so if he just continue travelling towards the West, he'll reach the Qin borders sooner or later.

But then he thought about it again. Since the Hans are certain he is within their borders, they'll naturally barricade

the paths leading towards Qin so if he travel Westward, he'll just be falling right into their trap.

The only way now is to hide until the danger is gone, until the enemy relaxes their guard before trying to find a way to return to the Qin border.

At this point in time, someone came right up to the edge of the lake shining a torch, reflecting the surface of the lake into a sea of red.

One of the men laughed, "If you were him, won't you try to run away quickly?"

Someone else answered, "But the dogs keep barking, maybe he's still hiding nearby. Why don't we release the dogs and let them run after him, won't that save us much effort?"

Such a suggestion was immediately met with agreement by everyone else.

The ropes were loosened and five to six hunting dogs shot towards the forest next to the lake like arrows, followed by the sounds of a fight between a howling wolf and the barking dogs, the sound gradually getting fainter.

Only now did the pursuing soldiers realize that they have been misled, the hounds were running after a nearby wolf and not Xiang Shaolong. They all ran shouting after the dogs.

Xiang Shaolong climbed up back to shore, all wet and knows that he has now become the number one war criminal which the six states have all put a bounty on. Unless he returns to Qin, otherwise no matter how big the world is, there won't

be a place for him. He dare not stop and gave up the thought of going towards the village to ask for directions. He turned around and went towards the east, going further and further away from Qin.

That night, he escaped back to the mountainous regions and started climbing cliffs and mountains again. Luckily most of the state of Han is filled with mountainous terrain, otherwise his enemies would have caught up with him long ago.

Now that he knows that he is in the state of Han, he took a closer look at his surroundings and could slowly make out some recognizable mountains and rivers. He was ecstatic and travelled towards the Jing family village, the place where Jing Jun was born.

Three days later, the familiar scene of the Jing family village appeared before his eyes.

By now he is skinny beyond recognition and weak but he is finally relieved and could no longer hold on as he collapsed into a dead faint.

CHAPTER 2

Risky Moves

[Translated by JEAN]

WHEN Xiang Shaolong work up, he realized he's lying on a wooden bed in a village hut. Medication was applied to the wounds on his body and he's changed into clean clothes. Such a feeling of comfort is really indescribable.

The village lady who was waiting by his bed saw him wake up and ran out in shock to call the others.

In a short while, the village leader Jing Nian and a few village elders came. They all treated him with the respect due to a deity. After listening to him relate what happened, Jing Nian

said, "We did send out our men to find information. The soldiers are still searching for Master Xiang. We heard that if Master Xiang is captured, there is a reward of a hundred pieces of gold so they are all trying their best.

Xiang Shaolong sat up, eating the food on the bed and asking at the same time, "Does the whole village know that I am here?"

Jing Nian replied, "We won't be so careless, a person's heart is unfathomable. Luckily the person who found Master Xiang unconscious outside our village is my son, so only the few of us know about Master Xiang."

Another elder Jing Xiong added, "Master Xiang, just rest assured and stay here to tend to your injuries. Once the matter dies down a little, we'll assign men to send you back to Qin."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "To return to Qin from here is even more difficult than ascending heaven. Also, I can't stay here for long or I will bring you catastrophe."

Jing Xiong said, "In that case our whole clan might as well accompany Master Xiang back to Qin." All the elders nodded their head vigorously in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Of course I will welcome all of you to Qin, but now is not the right time. It'll have to wait until I return to Qin, that's the only way to ensure nothing will happen."

Another elder asked, "Then what should we do now?"

Xiang Shaolong thought hard for a while before answering, "I'll have to trouble you to send out someone who is agile and totally trustworthy to go to Zhongmou and inform Teng Yi and Jing Jun that I am safe but can only go back after a period of time. Tell them to lead the army well and wait patiently."

Jing Xiong said, "That is easy, our villagers frequently go to Zhongmou to pick herbs. Not only are they familiar with the route, they are also friendly with the people there so they definitely won't raise any suspicion."

Xiang Shaolong was relieved of one issue and said, "The soldiers will search their way here sooner or later. There are a lot of talents amongst the people after me. You can use my clothes and items to create an illusion that I have ran somewhere else. This will buy us another two to three days and I can take this time to recover and start my escape."

After some discussion, Jing Xiong and the elders all left the room.

Xiang Shaolong fell into a deep sleep and by the time he woke up it was the middle of the night and all was quiet except for the howling wind outside and the barking dogs. He can't help but feel his emotions go on a roller coaster ride.

The first time he came to this place, it was the middle of winter and with him at that time was the royal Zhao Princess, Zhao Qian. They spent a loving night in each other's

arms them but how can they predict that their destiny will end with Zhao Qian's horrible death.

He can't help but feel a deep hatred for Lu Buwei welling up inside him.

He screamed in his heart: No matter what! I, Xiang Shaolong must return to Xianyang alive and witness Xiao Pan's ascension to the throne and Lu Buwei's horrible end.

When day broke, Jing Nian came with news that will make him glad.

Turns out that although his 2,000 strong army was totally exterminated, but their sacrifice was worth it, for it allowed the main bulk of the Qin army to return to Zhongmou safely. Right now Li Mu's army is surrounding and attacking Zhongmou but there are news that he has suffered quite a lot of casualties as well.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved. They had predicted that the Zhaos will launch a counter-attack at Zhongmou so they've already stocked up on grains and fortified the city walls. Besides, with Huan Qi's army to support them, even if the enemy is Li Mu, he'll not find it easy to reclaim Zhongmou.

With Li Mu's intelligence, the only way for him ultimately is to retreat back to Changcheng.

Jing Nian added, "I sent someone to Zhongmou yesterday, so there won't be any problem with this issue. Hai!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that something is on his mind and said with a smile, "You're elderly, please speak your mind."

Jing Nian said, "Master Xiang is right. Another troop of soldiers went to the Shang family village 50 miles from here yesterday and they were searching and snatching things, even injuring a few of their people. The Shang family village saw that there were a lot of soldiers so they dare not make any comments although they were furious."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and asked, "How long will it take to travel from there to here?"

Jing Nian said, "At least 2 days. Master Xiang can wait until tomorrow morning before you leave."

He paused and added, "It seems that the Han Wang'an have sent out a team of people from Nanzheng of Ducheng who are expert in tracking in the wilderness to search for Master Xiang. Some of our people came back from Nanzheng and said that the two states of Zhao and Han already have secret meetings to discuss how to capture you."

He took out a map from his sleeve and passed it to Xiang Shaolong, saying, "I drew this map personally over the last two days. It may be a little rough but I daresay that it's generally correct."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. He got dressed and came down the bed, feeling more than half of his energy coming back. If he have another day's rest, he'll have higher confidence that he will be able to escape.

The two of them sat down at the corner of a table and opened up the map to study it.

Jing Nian pointed at a cross in the middle of the map and said, "This is our Jing family village. On the upper right corner at the northeast, about a hundred miles away is the Capital of Han, Nanzheng. Another 200 miles northeast from there, that's the Capital of the state of Wei, Daliang."

Xiang Shaolong said, "I'll burn this map immediately after I'm done seeing it. Otherwise if someone else gets a hand on this map, they'll know that you have been protecting me."

Jing Nian's expression changed slightly, for this is a point that he had never considered.

After Xiang Shaolong let Jing Nian explain in detail the river and mountain terrain drawn on the map, he kept the map and said, "It's best that even Grandpa Nian doesn't know my escape route, then you won't be able to accidentally reveal anything and incur other people's suspicions."

Jing Nian nodded his head gladly.

Xiang Shaolong made the best use of time to rest and when he woke up, he memorized the map. After much thought and deliberation, he finally decided to take the risky route and go towards the Wei border before returning to the State of Zhao where he is most familiar with. After that he will travel west towards Tunliu and meet up with Huan Qi and he'll be able to accomplish his grand plan of thousand miles escape.

Once he's sure that he has remembered all the details on the map, he burned it.

After dinner, Xiang Shaolong decided to travel while it's dark. Jing Nian has already prepared rations, water, clothes and also collected a small amount of money for him as well.

Most interestingly, Jing Xiong gave him a rabbit in a bamboo cage and explained, "This is a simple way to deal with the hounds. As hunting dogs are very sensitive to a rabbit's scent, their scent can cover the scent emitted from a human body. If the hunting dogs sniff out the rabbit and come after you, just release the rabbit and let it lure the hunting dogs into a wild chase."

Jing Nian added, "We've discussed, after Master Xiang leaves, we'll abandon the village and move to the middle of the mountains to avoid trouble. Regarding Xiao Jun's move to the State of Qin, some news have more or less leaked out. Since the officials have gone to the Shang family village, maybe they'll find out about this so even if Master Xiang has never been here, they may still vent their anger on us."

Xiang Shaolong felt apologetic and asked, "When do you plan to leave?"

Jing Nian replied, "We will delay no further. Once Master Xiang leaves we'll pack up immediately and move."

After bidding one another farewells, Xiang Shaolong carried the possible scapegoat, the rabbit and once again started on his escape journey.

Xiang Shaolong rode on the healthy horse that Jing Nian gave him and travelled a distance towards Daliang in the

northeast. As he did not want the horse to be over exhausted, he stopped to let the horse rest.

He can still make out the lights and lanterns in the Jing family village a distant away.

This horse is very intuitive as it just breathed quietly on the plains, not making any whinnying sounds at all.

He plans to spend 3 days with this horse.

Once they pass the flat plains, he will go into the mountainous area on foot. That would be much safer.

Honestly, he does not believe that anyone will be able to follow him in a mountainous area.

But if not for the Jing family village offering him refuge and a chance to take a break as well as getting food, horse, bows and arrows and some necessities, the Hans may very well have caught up with him by now.

After all there is a limit to one's endurance.

He can't help but feel positive as he thought of the scene when he's finally reunited with Teng, Jing and the rest, until his safe return to Xianyang to be welcomed by his beloved wife, maids and son.

Suddenly he could hear hoofbeats coming from the front.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as he flew up his horse and galloped up to the top of a nearby hill so that he can take a good look at the situation.

About 5 miles away, what looks like a fire dragon that was made up of torches was snaking its way here, their destination must likely to be the Jing family village.

Xiang Shaolong's limbs went cold immediately.

Jing Nian's concern is not for nothing, the enemy has indeed gotten news from the Shang family village and knows that someone from the Jing family village has gone to Xianyang.

In this era there's not a lot of people with the family name Jing and it'll be easy to guess their way to Jing Jun and Jing Shan. Otherwise why would the enemy rush there in the night?

If Xiang Shaolong is a selfish person, he will run away with no hesitation at this very moment, the further he can run the better. But how can he escape by himself.

Just as he was feeling at a loss, he suddenly had an idea. He got hold of an opportunity and galloped towards a dense forest that the enemy must pass through to go to the Jing family village and took out his fire starter to start fire on several spots.

If it's spring or summer, this plan would not have worked. But now the wind is blowing and the atmosphere is dry. The light from the stars illuminated the plains and in a short while the fire spread and thick smoke rushed up to the sky.

Not only can this fire prevent the enemy from moving forward, it can also convey a most powerful message to the

people at the Jing family village and urge them to leave faster.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that they won't run after him so he deliberately made the horse ran loudly and swiftly on the plains towards the northeast.

He'd rather lose his own life than to let anyone in the Jing family village come to any harm.

By the time it's dawn the next day, Xiang Shaolong is still riding on the endless plains but he has already slowed down.

This time, he deliberately revealed his whereabouts to lure the enemy to ran after him so that they will have no time to deal with the people in Jing family village. If his opponent has expert trackers, this plan of his will be a very dangerous one.

From time to time he will come across rivers or streams in his way. Such pretty scenery which during normal circumstances is a feast to the eyes, have not become his obstacles instead.

Luckily right until now there's no sight of the pursuing enemy. If such a situation continues, he will be able to safely reach the unpopulated mountainous areas at the Han and Wei border.

The Weis will never expect that instead of going west towards Qin, he'd actually travel east towards the Han border so they certainly won't put up their guards there. By then he'll be able to travel back to Tunliu via the Han border.

The horse is foaming at the mouth by now and Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to stop and stand guard at a high area to let the horse graze and drink at a small stream below the slope.

He has no appetite for food at all but to preserve his energy, he had no choice but to force himself to swallow two mouthfuls of dried meat.

The taste is actually not too bad.

These past few years, there were very little occasions for him to be roaming in the wilderness alone and he can't help but think about his strange time travel encounter.

In a blink of an eye, it's been seven years.

During these years, even those closest to him like Ji Yanran, Teng Yi etc does not know his secret. He can only keep this piece of earth shattering secret that he is actually from the 21st century deep in his heart.

As for Xiao Pan's secret, there's still Teng Yi and Wu Tingfang who knows.

He is very clear on what Xiao Pan's fate will be, because Xiao Pan will become Emperor Qin, the one who built and unified China.

But he is totally unclear about his own fate.

Even the question of returning to Xianyang alive is an unknown right at this moment.

Just as he was pondering, he could hear hoof beats coming from afar again.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and looking over, his countenance changed immediately.

He saw that near the woods about two miles away, about 50 odd healthy horses were galloping at full speed but only half of the horses have riders while the others were without saddles.

From the way that the horses can run so neatly and swiftly behind the main group without being leashed, he knows that, not only are these horses quality horses but also well trained warhorses.

After so many years of experience, he has learnt how to differentiate people by their riding skills.

These 27 riders could still weave left and right effortlessly in such mountainous and unfamiliar terrain, he knew that they are all first rated riders.

The worst thing is that his riding and archery skills are still his weakest. On such flat terrain and with them having back up horses to switch to, if they manage to catch up with him, he won't even have the chance to retaliate. The enemy can catch up with him so quickly, so they must be expert trackers. Maybe these are the ones that Jing Nian heard, the experts under specific orders by Han Wang'an to arrest him.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed his surroundings, gritted his teeth and dashed down the slope. He jumped onto the horse's

back and quietly muttered 'Sorry, horse', as he urged the horse to gallop around the small hill and run for his life.

His destination is the dense forest at the end of the flat plains. If he can make his way there, he'll be able to make use of the surroundings there to have a life and death battle with the enemy. He will not sit there and be killed and sully the reputation of the best special task force warrior of the 21st century.

Xiang Shaolong removed his gear from the horse and used a cloth to tie two heavy stones which is about his weight and hung it on the horse's saddle. After that he used a sharp knife and pierced into the horse's buttock.

The horse screamed and galloped into the dense forest with the stones on it.

By now the pursuing enemy is about half a mile away. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong stepped into the stream and travelled about half a mile along it so that the enemy will not be able to find his footsteps, they may already have caught up with him.

But since the enemy can still follow him, it means that they obviously have very outstanding trackers among them.

He dare not hesitate and hurriedly carried his luggage and ran deep into the forest.

After walking for a while, he could hear hoof beats passing him from behind and quickly fading away.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief as he sped up and ran towards a tall hill in the forest.

Even if he came upon vines or roots blocking his way, he dare not use his sword to cut them away for fear of leaving traces behind.

He has gone for about a hundred odd feet when he could hear the hoof beats hurriedly returning from the way they left, straight towards his position.

Xiang Shaolong calmed down instead at this time.

As a member of the special task force, it is a requirement and an iron rule that one must keep calm in the face of impending danger.

He quietly analyzed the situation and thought that since the enemy could tell that it's a trap, he is sure that they are not only relying on hoof prints to pursue him. Just as he was feeling perplexed, he heard barking coming nearer and nearer and from the sound of it, there's only one dog.

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened and was feeling ecstatic instead of shocked. He hid himself among some thick bushes, squatted down and removed the bamboo cage with the rabbit from his back and waited patiently.

By now the sky is slowly getting darker. Xiang Shaolong took out his dagger and peeped through the leaves, totally concentrating on the movements outside.

The dog barks stopped only to hear hasty footsteps coming nearer as the enemies abandoned their horses to go on foot.

In a short while, more than ten odd black shadows that were spread out came slowly towards him from about 30 feet away, with one of them holding on to a leash with a small dog at the other end, barking madly as it strained towards his hiding place.

Xiang Shaolong quietly opened the cage.

The rabbit was already trembling in fear when it heard the barks earlier and now that it saw an escape route, it shot out like an arrow and ran off towards the left.

That dog was indeed instantly alert and turned towards that direction, barking and running madly.

The person holding the leash shouted, "Hurry! Spot is running towards that direction!"

The enemy all ran after it.

Once Xiang Shaolong has made sure that all the enemy has retreated, he jumped up and followed after them, quietly thinking to himself, 'Don't blame me for being ruthless but in such a situation, there's no place for mercy at all.'

CHAPTER 3

Surrounded by Enemies

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

GRASPING Bloodwave, Xiang Shaolong overtook an enemy soldier who was lagging behind the rest. He reached from behind to cover his enemy's mouth while Blood Wave pierced the enemy's neck from the side. The enemy only struggled a moment before taking his last breath. Xiang Shaolong handily took over his crossbow and bolts. The rest of the enemies ahead were focused on the path the pursuing dog had gone. The day had also darkened to the point where it was difficult to spot the path, hence the enemies were

oblivious to the God of Death pressing from the rear. When Xiang Shaolong had used the same tactic to dispatch the next enemy soldier, the rest of the enemies had halted at a grass patch. A ten-foot high pile of rocks was blocking the path. Apparently, the rabbit was hiding in there somewhere, compelling the dog to pounce and howl continuously. One person shouted "Light the torches!" At this moment, Xiang Shaolong had already used the cover of the trees to sneak up on one of the men, dragged him aside and murdered him while seizing the crossbow in his hand.

Five torches ignited, dyeing the jungle blood-red. All around, ancient trees reached to the sky. As the tall trees cut-off the sunlight all year round, only a few creepers managed to grow on the ground. The only exception was a ten feet wide clump of shrubbery, presenting an obvious target. The remaining twenty four enemies had their crossbows tensed and ready to fire. The leader of the enemies shouted towards the shrubbery: "Xiang Shaolong, you can forget about escaping this time. Come out obediently, else we will burn you till you have no remains left." The dog had been recalled by its master with a low shout and had stopped barking. It had even lain down submissively, extremely obedient.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed the situation and saw that the men were standing close to each other and were illuminated by the torches. It would be difficult to repeat his ploy of attacking from behind. Taking advantage of the crackling from the torches, he took out his climbing hook and shot it

over a branch on the tree beside him. Naturally the rabbit in the undergrowth did not respond to the man's shout. However those men appeared unwilling to set fire to the brush for fear of causing collateral damage. After abusing him for a while more, one of the men took a look around and exclaimed in surprise: "Yi! Where is Dian Cheng?" Xiang Shaolong emerged from behind the tree and replied "I am here!". As everyone turned towards him in shock, the crossbows in his left and right arms emitted their terrifying twang. Two of the men carrying torches were pierced in the chest and fell. Their torches also fell to the ground.

When the enemies finally returned fire, Xiang Shaolong had dodged behind the large tree and climbed up with his apparatus. As he was hidden amidst the thick leaves and branches, the rest of the men thought he was still taking cover behind the tree. They spread out and surrounded the tree. The fallen torches had started two bush fires which spread rapidly, creating a lot of thick smoke. Xiang Shaolong first retrieved his hook and then shot it towards the branches of another large tree about twenty feet away. Securing the hook, he then surveyed the situation from his vantage point, awaiting the enemies' response.

Coughing sounds emanated and the dog whimpered. Four of the men were compelled forward by the fire and smoke, and were about to dash towards Xiang Shaolong's original hiding place behind the tree when Xiang Shaolong fired the crossbows in his hands. Two enemies collapsed immediately.

The bushfire had now increased greatly with thick smoke everywhere, obscuring Xiang Shaolong's line of sight. After shooting down another enemy, he hurriedly traversed to the other tree in the air using the already secured hook. The enemies had now reached the tree he was originally at under the cover of smoke, only to discover that there was no one there. Meanwhile, three more enemies had been shot down by him. Of the twenty seven enemies originally, nine had been felled by his guerrilla tactics. The remaining men had also been frightened into scattering and hiding, and no longer had their former fighting spirit.

Xiang Shaolong had achieved his objective and traversed to an even further tree before nimbly rappelling back to ground. He ran towards the direction where the enemies' horses' hoof sounds had previously stopped. Slightly more than an hour later, he finally exited the woods. Close to fifty war horses were tied up just outside the woods. It was already midnight and the moon was high in the sky, filling the land with a mysterious atmosphere. After selecting a strong horse, he cut the ropes on the rest and lashed them all together. He then lightly poked one of the horse's thigh with Blood Wave. The horse neighed in pain and ran off together with the rest of the horses shoving and pulling. Xiang Shaolong hopped on the remaining horse, but it was a while before he was able to control the horse and ride away freely.

Three days later, while crossing a prairie, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly ditched his horse and crossed the Wei-Han

border. His mood was now greatly improved, feeling as if he were on a sight-seeing tour. Between the Wei capitol Daliang and the Han capitol Nanheng lay Zhongmu, which was at present only 100 miles North of where he was. Xiang Shaolong had to exert a large amount of his self-control before he could suppress his strong urge to head straight to the refuge in Zhongmu. That would of-course be most unwise and reckless.

The weather had gradually turned cold. Fortunately, Jing Nian had prepared Winter clothing for him, allowing him to avoid suffering in the cold. He walked for five days before reaching the outskirts of Lianshan district. The rising sun emerged in the East. Sunshine sprinkled over the ridges and plains, finishing the grass and trees in yellow, presenting a scene of boundless vitality. Nearby was a lake. As the cold wind blew over, the water rippled and the reflection of the trees danced in a delightfully colourful pattern, causing Xiang Shaolong to be even more carefree and relaxed, forgetting his situation as a fugitive.

Lush primeval forests and dense undergrowth, endless wild meadows and marshland surrounding a lake resembling a large mirror, truly a wonderful scenery. Many tents were pitched on the meadow beside the lake. Large numbers of horses and sheep were also leisurely grazing on the grassland. The atmosphere was harmonious and peaceful. Xiang Shaolong watched for a long time before collecting his thoughts, and headed towards Daliang. He naturally wouldn't walk right into a trap by heading for Daliang

directly, but intended to reach the outskirts of Daliang before using the previous route he had taken from Zhao to Daliang to enter the Zhao border. Even though he had to go in a big circle, it was the safest route he could think of.

Two hours later, he was on a prairie deep within the Wei border. He recalled on the night of the ambush, Ji Feng must have borne him close to three hundred miles in escape, from his location then, to the Zhao-Wei border and then to the mountain range near the Jing family village before collapsing in exhaustion. Presently, he could be said to be in familiar ground.

After walking Northeast for another six hours, he heard hoof beats ahead. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly hid himself. A moment later, a close to twenty strong squad of Wei soldiers galloped into view. They ascended a nearby hill, raised camp and posted sentries. Xiang Shaolong felt his scalp numb, his heart exclaiming in dismay. The Wei people must have received news that he was alive and had possibly escaped here.

The fact was, whether he headed to Zhongmu or Daliang, it would be open plains all the way. The Weis would certainly be familiar with their own territory and would only need to post sentries on all the high points. If he was even slightly careless, his route would be revealed and it would be difficult for him to avoid the consequences of capture. The enemy had evidently just started their operations. Once the sentry post had been established, they would certainly start a blanket search of the entire area. With fast horses and

hunting dogs searching for him, he could forget about escaping with his life. Most vexing was the fact that there were several large rivers on his path to Daliang. The Weis would only need to post sentries along the river, then he would not have the confidence to sneak across even at night. Pondering this, he nonetheless knew he had to forge ahead. The alternative was to return to the mountains, which was not an option. At the moment, the danger would not be any less returning to the Han border or heading South to Chu territory. The question was whether he should steel himself and dash North to Zhongmu. He could then regroup with Teng Yi and Jing Jun in a matter of days. This thought was now even more enticing than before, but he also knew that that was the most dangerous of all routes.

Xiang Shaolong continued this internal struggle on where to proceed until the sun set in the West. In the end, he resolved to explore the route to Zhongmu. Only if he could not find a way past the blockade would he head East towards Daliang, following his original plan to return to Qin via Zhao. Having made the decision, he felt more relaxed. He took another hour to bypass the enemy's sentry post before continuing North towards Zhongmu.

Before reaching Zhongmu, he needed to pass by another Wei city "Jiao Cheng". Naturally he would not think of entering the city. He had to be extra careful to avoid being discovered by the city's defenders. Relying on his Special Forces training, he covered thirty miles before daybreak, running until his legs ached. In the end, he hid in a patch of

dense jungle to rest. Not letting down his guard, he exerted more effort to climb up a large tree and concealing himself in its thick foliage before lying down on a branch and closing his eyes to rest. This tree was taller than others and was at the edge of the forest grove. From it, he could survey the surrounding plains as well as the main road to Jiao Cheng. He was soon fast asleep.

An indefinite time later, he was awakened by the sound of horses and men. Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes and started in shock. Both the insides and outside of the jungle were filled with Wei soldiers. Even a conservative estimate numbered them at about a thousand. They were making a thorough search of the area. He was immediately covered in cold sweat, realising that being overly exhausted, he was not aroused until the enemy was directly below him. In fact, if he had not been sleeping in a groove formed by three branches, he might have fallen to the ground in his stupor. He did not dare move even his fingers and toes. Only after the Wei soldiers had passed by did he dare to peek his head out to survey the situation.

Two teams of cavalry rode past on the official road outside the jungle grove. Further out, there was a hill with even more horses and men. The commanders of this search appeared to be there. Looking at the scale of the search, he knew that the Wei King whom he had formerly benefitted had spared no effort in his command to capture or kill Xiang Shaolong. This contingent of more than two thousand soldiers were likely from Jiao Cheng's garrison, and were

likely only a portion of the entire search party. With such strength in numbers and the Wei people's home ground advantage, he realised he would be unable to advance even an inch.

He couldn't help feeling a tinge of regret. If he had not impatiently reached for Zhongmu but had detoured to Daliang instead, he would not be in his present danger. Right now, it seemed the safest option would be to return to the mountainous Wei-Han border. He could then hide there for ten days to half a month while the tempest died down. It would then be much easier to get to wherever he wanted to go.

At this moment, the sound of dogs barking rang out in the forest. Xiang Shaolong's tensed, awaiting his fate. At present, the large number of people present had muddled the scents so he was not afraid of being discovered by the hounds' acute noses. However, if he was escaping alone in the dead of the night, it would be difficult for him to escape the hounds' attention. Seeing the enemy's troop disposition, how would he dare to continue towards Jiao Cheng? Once the patrolling soldiers had left, he would change his direction from North to East towards the South of Daliang.

Staking his all and after avoiding endless waves of pursuing soldiers, Xiang Shaolong finally arrived at the West bank of the famous river "Jia Lu He". Looking across, both sides were tranquil and undisturbed, nary a person in sight. But he was also certain that there were concealed sentries in the jungle overlooking the river. He scrutinised carefully, spotting a

place where more than ten enemies could conceal themselves. He then ascended a tree and hid himself patiently, waiting for nightfall.

He quickly fell asleep from his exhaustion. When he awoke, the entire landscape had turned into beautiful white wonderland. His face and upper body were covered with light snow, but he did not feel cold. The first snowfall had finally arrived. Xiang Shaolong brushed off the powdery snow on his body and looked somberly at the continuing snowfall. Snow storms were good for concealing hiding places, but terrible for flight. If he jumped into the water now and emerged from the river wet, he would freeze to death. Moreover, once the snowfall stopped, the footprints he left behind would make it impossible for him to evade the pursuing enemies.

At the moment, he only had three choices:

The first was to chop wood and construct a raft to ford the great river. However this would be time consuming and prone to incidents and dangerous, unless he could be sure that the enemies' sentries were not nearby. Else once he alerted the enemy, he would not even have the chance to defend himself.

The second option was to follow the bank upriver. From Jing Nian's map, the source of this river was a mountainous region Southwest of Zhongmu. Nonetheless, once he rounded the river, he would be near the Southern corner of Zhongmu, which would be extremely dangerous. Moreover,

if he then wanted to carry on to Daliang, the route would be 500 miles longer than what he originally planned, totally not worth it.

The final option was to head downriver. Even though this would bring him further and further from Daliang, it would allow him to escape the danger zone relatively easily. If he could reach the peaceful areas where several large rivers converged, he could even look for an opportunity to cross the river on a boat. More, he could divert even further South to the Chu border. Then even if he was captured by the Chus, he might even be released by Li Yan Yan or Li Yuan privately on account of their former affections.

Once he made his decision, he hurriedly got on the move and followed the river South. He walked until daybreak before the snow finally stopped. When Xiang Shaolong turned his head to look, he saw his footprints like a long tail on the virgin snow and silently called out in misery. After he carried on a while more, he realised that if he carried on thus, he would be discovered by the pursuing soldiers sooner or later. With sudden inspiration, he stopped, inspected his surroundings, formulated a plan and hurried towards a nearby forest grove. Entering the forest, he drew Blood Wave and cut down a relatively slender pomegranate tree. He next used his dagger to pare the tree into two five feet long skis. The front foot of the skis were raised slightly. The middle of the skis were also raised slightly, extending front and back, just enough for him to step on it with his booted feet. He next drilled four small holes in the wood, cut

his hooks into two and used them to secure his boots to the skis through the holes. The most clever was the groove at the bottom of the skis from front to back, emulating modern skis.

At dusk, this first pair of skis in China was finally realised. As a Special Force soldier, Xiang Shaolong had received expert skiing training. Proceeding thus was as easy as ABC to him. After completing the skis, he also fashioned some ski poles. The top was wider and the bottom narrowed to a point. Three inches above the sharpened point, he lashed a horizontal stick, serving as "snow disks"¹.

When everything was complete, it was already late at night. Cutting and paring the hard as iron pomegranate tree had cost him a lot of energy, so he rested a while before making his next move. He hung the skis and ski poles on his back and ran to the riverbank on foot. Although it was difficult to make each step, his mood was greatly improved from before. By daybreak, he had covered about three miles, arriving at the banks of the great river. He deliberately climbed down the banks, leaving distinct footprints before doubling back by stepping into the footprints, climbing back up the bank. Next, he put on his skis, and secured them. He gave a shout and began his miraculous feat of skiing.

He utilised the undulating landscape, increasing his speed, unhurried but quick, rounded a large circle and returned to

¹ Translator's explanation: "I think he's referring to the discs at the bottom of ski poles that prevent them from sinking in too deep. Huang Yi must be a fan of skiing to think of this detail."

the forest grove. He then hid himself on top of a taller than average tree and waited. His spirit was immeasurably stimulated, and required a long time before he was able to calm himself down and close his eyes to get some sleep.

Roused by noise, Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes to look, and was shocked out of his wits. The entire landscape was covered with Wei cavalry, at least a thousand strong. They were following his distinct footprints towards the forest grove. He saw them pass through the forest grove towards the riverbank, to where his footprints ended before suddenly halting to confer. Soon, the Wei soldiers dismounted and rapidly cut wood to build rafts, and endless hum of activity. At this moment, Snow started falling again, more heavily than the previous snowfall. Waves of snow clumps started falling from the ash grey sky, sometimes slowly, sometimes flurriedly. By midday, all hoofprints and footprints prior to the snowfall had been obscured.

Xiang Shaolong silently thanked the heavens for their assistance. This way, once the enemy had forded the river and failed to find his footprints, they could only spread out to comb the area, getting further and further away from him in their pursuit. Originally detrimental to him, the snowfall had become his protective charm. As he was celebrating in his heart, barking sounds started in the distance. A hundred plus strong contingent of Wei foot soldiers with hunting dogs was coming along the river.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realised that this team was part of the cavalry regiment that had constructed rafts and crossed

the river. The cavalry had rushed ahead because they had seen his footprints and also because of the impending snowfall, hence the canine contingent had lagged behind by two hours. He couldn't help exclaiming at his close shave. If it had been the canine contingent that had arrived first earlier, his brilliant plan might not have succeeded. But now, the heavy snowfall had covered his scent!

It was dusk before the entire Wei regiment crossed the river. Xiang Shaolong patiently waited for another two hours before climbing down the tree. Taking advantage of the dark night, high winds and snow-filled sky, he took up his ski poles, and like a bird over a boundless snowscape, he flew towards the Jia Lu river. With this apparatus to "fly over" the snowy landscape, he decided to risk a bit of danger and edged towards Zhongmu. From his first escape until now, this was the first time he felt any hope for the future.

CHAPTER 4

Towards Shichun in Secret

[Translated by YEONGWEE, SKWANDREW, &
CHOWBENG]

XIANG SHAOLONG lay in the underbrush observing the enemy's barracks. In just two days, he had covered what would have taken an ordinary person ten days, reaching a Zhao encampment approximately ten miles from Zhongmu. He was originally confident of sneaking past the enemy's defensive perimeter, but seeing the ground situation, this unfulfilled dream burst like foam bubbles in sunshine. Most aggravating was the fact that Li Mu had cut down all the

trees in the area that might have offered him cover. He had also dug long trenches in the plains where Xiang Shaolong was and posted guards on all passageways. Even if he could somehow cross the trenches, he still had to surmount three layers of fences before he could reach the barracks. And then he had to sneak past ten miles of barracks and finally through a stretch of plains outside Zhongmu that was completely devoid of cover.

Looking at Li Mu's arrangements, he must be preventing anyone from approaching Zhongmu. Xiang Shaolong was like a delirious half-starved kitten seeing a fish but being unable to consume it. The agony was beyond description. His only gratification was that while Li Mu had put a water-tight seal around Zhongmu, he was still unable to breach Zhongmu's sturdy walls. He was most familiar with Zhongmu's capabilities. Defending Zhongmu for even a year would not be a difficult thing.

At the moment, he had only two choices. The first was to follow his original plan to get to Daliang and then to the Zhao border before reuniting with Huan Qi at Tunliu. The other option was to go round Zhongmu, sneak past the Zhao soldier's frontier defence and then back to Qin. The latter option was of course much more dangerous. With Li Mu's meticulous planning, he is sure to have outposts preventing Qin soldiers from rendering assistance from the East. If he did not have his skis, this option was akin to walking into a trap. But at this point, it was not without a chance of success. Just as this desire was burning in his heart, the

sound of horses and dogs came from the Southwest. Xiang Shaolong's heart sank straight down. He finally let go of this enticing thought, got up and headed towards Daliang.

He reached the outskirts of the Wei capitol Daliang at dusk the next day. Having returned to the scene of his previous exploits, thought about the late Prince Xinling Wei Wuji and could not help his conflicting emotions. At this point he had already exhausted his dried rations and was both hungry and tired. Yet Daliang's defences had obviously been strengthened. All the high points were staffed with sentries. Most despairing for him were the few large rivers and man-made ditches obstructing the road towards Daliang.

Observing the area, he realised that he had to cross the rivers to reach Daliang before crossing the ditches on the other side of Daliang in order to get to the Zhao border. It would also be best for him to stock up on foodstuff on the way as the bitter cold made it impossible to gather wild fruits to allay his hunger as he had been doing. At present, his greatest advantage was that the Wei people were still unaware that he had arrived at the vicinity of Daliang. To traverse Daliang and then rush to the Zhao border was not an impossibility.

²After decision was made, he was first hiding those stuffs such as ski board, crossbow at a certain place, and marked a symbol. Then he climbed up onto a big tree, swept away the

² Starting this paragraph, continued by SKWANDREW

snow, huddled beside the branch and utterly waits for the dawn.

At the mid-night, sleet was falling one after another, he felt freezing and trembling.

Suffering among cold and hunger, the only thing he could do is being patient.

After being attacked, he was always escaping from enemy strategies with his strong determination. However, when he is not chasing by enemies, he starts to think crankily.

Something like about the man who was sent by Jing Nian, did they can reach and inform Teng Yi about his news? Or about those wives in Xianyang, what would they react if they heard about his news? It's like tons of pressure in his mind, which makes him can't relax at all.

Painful of the body, is far less then pressure in the heart.

Suddenly he chills, and loses consciousness. When he wake up again that he found whole body is painful. He realized he was felt off from the tree, and the body covered by snow. Winter sun raise, sunlight entered into the forest softly. He tried so hard to get up, just feeling so hot on his face and the mental is going to collapse. He is sick in this critical moment! Xiang Shaolong feels extremely weak both mentally and physically, but he knows deeply if he don't continue the journey, the night comes, and he would not have his life to see the dawn of tomorrow.

By thinking about his wives, he try so hard to stand up, stumbling and climbing up back, walk along to the edge of forest. When he barely gets to edge, he can't stand for everything he had got, and fallen down.

For a long unconsciousness, he wakes, and the noise of cart wheel conflicting ground was heard by his ears. He opens his eyes, that he can only see a team of carts outgoing from Dàliáng's official road. Sunlight had already gone, dark clouds gather overhead, there is another snow storm incoming.

Xiang Shaolong knows that it is the very moment about dead or alive. He sneaked into the team by avoiding anyone attention. Climbed onto one of the carts, and fell onto soft wheat.

And then he had lost all his consciousness.

Someone voice has waken Xiang Shaolong. Although it is still suffer among hot and cold, tiredness and the head is like a lead. He still feels better than before. But his throat is burning like fire that he needs some ice water or tea extremely.

Xiang Shaolong is lifting up the tent of the cart. The only thing he can see in the endless white snow, are some houses besides the road. It is like after a nightmare, he has arrived into the city of Dàliáng.

The cart walks slowly, and heading to another destination. At the moment that Xiang Shaolong cannot determine about

it is better drop off here or not, the cart turned into a street, and entering into a residence yard.

Xiang Shaolong uses he last strength and willpower, and wait for a certain moment. The cart finally stops in front of a warehouse. Sunlight was totally went out, the workers are obviously not going to load off immediately. They just parked up and left.

Xiang Shaolong thinks it is so lucky. After waited for a while, and he uses all very last strength to let him falls onto the show.

He is pronating on the ground, refresh his mind to observe the circumstance. He see those warehouse are out of light but the front yawn is myriad light. From his point of view, it is known that this residence should belong to one of the Wèi's noble, and surrounding by high walls.

He is in the position of a rectangular open yawn, there is no any other thing expect the carts. One side of the yawn is a stable, another side are houses for slave beside the wall.

Dogs bark from somewhere in the front yawn. Xiang Shaolong is frightened out. In this era, noble residences are always having dogs, when noble is sleeping, they are patrol of the yawn.

For now the strength of Xiang Shaolong, there is no way for him to climb out from the wall, the only way he can do is find a place to hide himself up, and waits for tomorrow.

With the strength that come from nowhere, he climbed up and sneaks to the warehouse. At that time he feels he is recovering, and spirit is restoring.

When he got in front of a warehouse, he found that it is locked up heavily that he can't enter it.

He is so impulsive and check every door. When he is checking the last door, he found that it is the only door that does not lock up. He feels joy and push in.

The door has just close, blocked the light from the front yawn, a hot body is hugging him in a sudden. She yells "It is expected that you are not coming. Didn't mistress command you to drive a cart for her? Why are you coming back this early?"

Xiang Shaolong is grumbling inside. He is encountering into illicit relations of slaves. When he is out of word to explain, the infatuating lady encircles her arms to his neck, and kissed him softly.

It would be disrespectful to decline; Xiang Shaolong takes it with his illness.

The lady leaves his lips and trembling, says " You are not Shǐlíng, You are Liú jié, you can't cheat me."

Xiang Shaolong replies unclearly, scares about if she shouts out loud. Gets revert on the lady with a big hug, and actively kisses on her rich cherry lips.

The lady is fascinating in love, just struggle as follow customs, and passionate reacting to him. Maybe the

excitement of sexual desire, Xiang Shaolong is feeling way better from illnesses, and the most wonderful thing is he feels not cold as before.

The most exciting thing he feels that the seductive event is, he does not even know the appearance of the other party, only touches can feel she is a plentiful lady, and experienced in sexual.

Xiang Shaolong has strength in concentration against women. However, he is not a modest in rites. Now he is turned on by desire, unable to stop. Moreover, if he does not satisfy her, he has to subdue or kill her. To weigh the importance, former decision is better and it may deceive.

His hands are searching on her body to incite sexual passion. The lady starts breathing hardly, body is becoming soft and hot. If there is a light, it must be a burning cheek she has. Fingers are searching, he feels her coat is very thick surprisingly, warm and smooth thighs are compact and plentiful. He realizes that she is a very young one that she won't be older than 20.

Her reaction is like a burning fire, the body can't stand on his hugs and fondle, and can't stop groping his back. A groaning captivately comes from deep inside her lips that anyone knows what she desire for.

Especially she knows that he is not the one who is waiting for, but still reacting freely, therefore her mind is expansive on sexual relationship. Thus he does not feel any responsibility.

This thought leads him to be more relax, enjoys on sexual amorousness.

Suddenly, she detaches from him, leads him among darkness by holding his hand. Without her burning-hot body, he is feeling cold, weak again. He made a forced smile, he was never thought that a lady can be a panacea of his illness.

They are arrived and fall onto some wheat, there is a quilt on the wheat, so she was sneaking more than once that she is well prepared.

Laying on a comfortable “bed”, Xiang Shaolong never wants to get up again.

The lady is standing up, and takes off her clothes like a sex-starved person. She throws herself on Xiang Shaolong, with a smooth, warm and hot body. When she is starting to strip his clothes, Xiang Shaolong found that he is reacting passionately.

Xiang Shaolong smiles bitterly, he is poor but still addicted to sex. “You such are despicable person, usually looking at me with your desire.” The lady whispers on his ear. “I don’t know what did u pay ShiLing for this that he lets you come and humiliate me. Hurry up!”

Xiang Shaolong turns and compresses tightly on her. The lady says “Do you like me?” He mumbles, and concentrates on the joy of sexual relationship.

A endless debauchery involves in the warehouse.

Xiang Shaolong worked hard for a while, his strength cannot afford for this, so the lady takes proactively. For a while, she has done utmost, and ambushes on his body. Xiang Shaolong hugs tightly and says "I am not Liu Jie!"

She trembles. "Who are you?"

He has a planned answer. "I am Chen Wu, a worker that followed from the cart team. I want to see the situation of the warehouse but I met you. Thank God, I am so lucky. What is your name?"

The lady hesitated, and then she laughs out loud for a while. And he says "You dead man! Treated me like this! I am Qiu Lin, i am the maid of young master. Sigh! You! But you are better than yound master and Shi Ling, even Liu Jie is not as tough as you."

Xiang Shaolong feels free for this, asks "Would you please take me some food and drinks? But don't let anyone knows!" Qiu Lin sit up and indicating on his chest, whispers "OK! If someone knows this, I am dead too!" And she dresses up and goes out.

Xiang Shaolong wears his clothes and falls sleep because of much exertion.

After a while, he is waken by Qiu Lin. She lights on a oil lamp, looking at him with stunned speechless. Xiang Shaolong sits up, and looking on her too.

Qiu Lin's beauty is not as good as his wives, but still good-looking. The most attractive thing is that she has a dainty,

cute, delicate and attractive body. That is why Shi Ling addicts on her deeply. This girl is bewitching in all aspect.

Qiu Lin fondles on his bearded cheek, whispers "I've never seen such a dominant and handsome guy like you! You are just a little bit thin."

Xiang Shaolong hugged her over and said: "What sort of good food have you brought?"

Qiu Lin opened up the bundle, took out a pot of tea and a dozen mantou (steamed buns) .

Xiang Shaolong watched with great salivation, and devoured them right away. Qiu Lin asked, "What are the hooks on your belt used for?"

Xiang Shaolong made something up, "It is used for moving goods."

Qiu Lin, who clearly wasn't one that would think deeply into things, did not doubt him and asked, "Wouldn't Boss Xie who was in charge of transporting the grain, blamed you for slipping away like this?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "I had told him I was looking for friends, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Qiu Lin jested lewdly, "Looking for friends! More like looking for girls, and I just happened to be the girl."

Watching her flirted shamelessly with him, Xiang Shaolong in a flush of hot blood, almost wanted to pull over and have another roll in the hay. At the same time, in his heart, he

also rejoiced. Who could have expected that his earlier "roll", caused him to break out in a sweat, resulting in his physical condition to take a turn for the better.

Qiu Lin, showing a hint of resentment, cast a glance at Xiang Shaolong, said: "In the future, I would cast aside name and status, and only wished to be with you!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "You wouldn't be able to help yourself even if you wished otherwise." By asking seemingly casual questions, Xiang Shaolong tactfully sounded her out on the surrounding. Quickly he found out the mansion belonged to a minister of the Wei and the rough state of affairs in the household.

Qiu Lin sighed, "Young Master is coming back, I had to leave you"

Xiang Shaolong brought her in his embrace and softly said, "When can you return?"

Qiu Lin was in a confused state of emotion, "It depends on the situation, how could I tell?"

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong said, "For Sister Qiu Lin, there is nothing that I, Chen Wu would not do. If there are no mishaps, I'll just wait for you here. Sister Qiu will come here when she can, but it is important to bring some food and drink. If possible, some clothes too."

Qiu Lin, however was in a fit of passion, and paid no mind to all else, began to rain kisses on his face, constantly nodding.

Xiang Shaolong was still afraid she would ask others of him, so he told her not to do so, and then let her leave. Using the lighting from this temporary comfort zone, Xiang Shaolong shifted to a concealed corner of the warehouse, lay down and rested. This warehouse was full of firewood, which was an indispensable necessity in the severe winter.

For a time, he could take a breather. Not only he had a girl for company, he was also in no danger of being captured by Wei's troops. He only needed to build up his health before leaving by night using hook and rope to climb over the wall.

However, there are limits to one's physical endurance. If he was to travel in this freezing cold weather, he could at most last a few days. Zhao is to the north of Wei, the weather there would be even more severe. At that time, he was anxious to return Zhongmu, and thus made a wrong decision to turn north instead of south. If he had gone south, he would have reached Chu and would not be trapped in this situation where he could neither advance or retreat. It was indeed an unwise decision. Soon he fell asleep unconsciously. On the second day, although there were people coming in to take out bundles of firewood, they had no clue to his presence.

Before dusk, Qiu Lin brought some food, and said apologetically, "Wu Lang(young man or husband), please make do with it! Young Master's clothes don't fit you too well; there are not many men as tall as you."

Xiang Shaolong, however was totally satisfied, after sharing a moment of tenderness, let her go. Physically, he had more or less recovered and covertly figuring that this wasn't a suitable place to stay for too long.

Swiftly, before the vicious dogs were set free, he climbed over the wall into the street. With the howling snow, there were not many people. Those few on the streets were also hurrying along and paying little attention. Xiang Shaolong used a piece of rag torn off the thin quilt to cover his head and face and from his memory headed toward the north gate.

When walls were in sight, he was however shocked to discover that the walls were covered with thick ice and extremely slippery. It would be impossible to climb over even in the best possible conditions. Xiang Shaolong was, however unwilling to give up immediately. He found a suitable length of wall, and tried a dozen times but still to set the hook over the wall. At this point, he had no choice but to admit defeat, he also could now understand why there would so few sieges in the winter.

By this time, returning to the warehouse would be a problem due to the roaming dogs. Therefore he had no choice but to find a side lane and huddled up for the night before making his way cautiously towards the gates at dawn.

The snow stopped at midnight and sun rose up the horizon at dawn, Xiang Shaolong was walking down the street, with the feeling of being totally naked. He had always been proud

of the body, but now it was his biggest burden. He had specifically chose the side streets to avoid eyes and ears, where he came to an open space where a group of children was playing with the shuttlecock.

One of the children caught sight of him, and his face changed colour, and shouted, "The robber had came!"

The other children saw him and scattered off in fear. Xiang Shaolong sighed bitterly in his heart, "Do I look like a robber?" Suddenly, he understood where his problem lied.

CHAPTER 5

Held Back in Reserve

[Translated by CHOWBENG, KIDD, & REN WO XING]

XIANG SHAOLONG could no longer worried about exposing his identity and hurried towards the north gate.

If his guess was not off, the reason why those kids would call him a “bandit” was that they had seen his wanted poster somewhere and recognised his face.

Now he had been known as a public enemy in Wei, if those kids that had seen him, went home and told their parents. In no time at all, the whole of Daliang would be alarmed.

So if he missed the opportunity and did not escape now, he wouldn't be able to do so even if he grown wings.

At this junction, he no longer had the time to blame his own negligence. Fortunately, dark clouds started to form and cover the sun. Within the sight of the gate, snowflakes were dancing in the sky, providing him with a little cover.

As he reached a position where he could clearly observe the gate, he hid behind a big tree by the roadside, waiting motionlessly for an opportunity to break out of the city.

The gate was observed to be staffed by around thirty guards who inspected both people and carts going in and out of the city in a routine manner and did not seem to be particularly cautious or strict.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved and looked for an opportunity. If he managed to chance upon the sort of mule team he entered the city in, he would easily get away.

Hatefully, despite waiting for nearly an hour, there were no carts traveling out of the city, even traders were scarce. During this freezing cold season, it was certainly not suitable to go on a journey, the absence of travelers was the most reasonable thing.

At this time, hurried hooves could be heard rumbling in, A large group of over 100 Wei cavalry came galloping at full speed towards the gate and swiftly dismounted. They seem to be preparing themselves to face a fierce and imminent enemy.

In the mist of the wind and snow, Xiang Shaolong faintly heard someone mentioned his name.

A heart sank straight down.

The scenario that he hoped to avoid most had just happened.

The Weis knew he was in the city before he could get away.

The snow was getting heavier and heavier.

After he bought some small tools from a blacksmith shop, Xiang Shaolong sneaked back into that warehouse and hid himself. He inserted a small but extremely sharp saw plus two fine iron rods into his hollowed-out soles and glued back the bottom layer. Unless his soles were stripped off, otherwise no one would expect anything unusual. At this moment, he did not know exactly how these would be put into use, so they were just preventive measures.

After quite sometime, Qiu Lin came back again.

Xiang Shaolong remained in hiding, hardening his heart to ignore her call.

After Qiu Lin left disappointedly, he waited patiently till dusk before leaving the warehouse and returning to snow-filled streets.

The Wei troops were constantly patrolling the streets, check points were again setup at road junctions to question passerby.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the Weis had embarked on a rigorous and thorough search. So, he used the rope hook to mount over house by house. Only with great difficulties, he reached the Wei imperial district.

Thinking of the fact that the locust tree is still around but the people are no more, he can't help but felt dejected.

He wondered if Lady Ping Yuan is well and safe. He was suddenly startled out of his reminiscence by the sound of galloping horses.

Xiang Shaolong quickly steadied his mood, and under the cover of darkness, moved toward the living area of the ministers in the palace.

Because all the residents here were rich and respectable, he, on the contrary, didn't any Wei soldiers come to patrol and search.

Xiang Shaolong, using his the special task force skill, ran in a zigzag way, suddenly stopping and running, alternating between slow and fast.

At last, he stopped in front of a magnificent mansion house.

This inscription on the plate above the door read 'Lord Long Yang's Residence'.

After letting out a deep sigh, Xiang Shaolong followed the wall towards the direction of the building.

Arriving at the inner courtyard, he slipped on top of the wall. Only after confirming that there were no guard dogs on the prowl did he land on the ground.

He was in no hurry to find Lord Longyang. After inspecting the surroundings, he selected a large tree and shot out his grappling hook, pulling himself on top of the building.

Only after stabilizing his footing did he place Bloodwave, his dagger, and his other tools in a branched crook of the tree.

Returning to the ground, he snuck past several buildings at a go before arriving at the garden at the innermost residence.

Due to the blizzard, everyone in the residence had secreted themselves inside the building, making it extremely convenient for him to move about.

Passing by the garden, he trode upon a stone path, crossed a stone bridge, and arrived in front of a tall building.

Seeing that the building was three stories high and was located directly in the middle of the inner courtyard, he knew that he had arrived at Lord Longyang's residence.

By now, night had fallen. But lamplight shone out from the windows of the three-storied building, and an indistinct voice could be faintly heard as well.

Xiang Shaolong stealthily stepped on top of one of the windows and quietly looked inside the building.

Inside was a large hall. Two servant boys were seated at either side of the doorway, yawning widely.

Seeing this, he knew that Lord Longyang had yet to return. That was why those two poor boys had to force their eyelids open as they tiredly awaited their master's return.

Lord Longyang naturally must have heard the news that Xiang Shaolong had arrived in Daliang. Perhaps at this very moment, he was in the palace discussing this matter with He Liangping.

Xiang Shaolong thought quietly for a period of time, then firmly made up his mind. Climbing back outside, he climbed to the highest level of the residence, then pushed the window open and entered the room. He had entered what he believed to be the private bedroom of Lord Longyang.

The way the room was decorated was very feminine. A slender, sloping recliner bed could be seen. It was covered in perfume, filling the room with the sweet scent of spring.

Under the light of the lamp affixed to the nearest window, the room appeared graceful and elegant. One shelf was filled with all sorts of little curios and toys, but only a single precious sword had been hung on the wall, demonstrating the martial energy of the room's master.

Xiang Shaolong, paying no mind to proprieties, lay down on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

After some period of time, the sound of footsteps startled him into wakefulness.

Xiang Shaolong immediately sat up, his rapt gaze instantly focusing on the slowly opening door.

Lord Longyang walked into the room, his feet moving slowly, as though encumbered by a thousand-pound heavy pair of shackles. "You two, go to bed!"

The two servants acknowledged the order and left.

Lord Longyang mournfully walked in, letting out a sad sigh.

Xiang Shaolong whispered, "High Lord!"

Lord Longyang's 'elegant form' trembled as he turned to stare, astonished, into his bedroom.

Xiang Shaolong pushed aside the veil covering the bed. With a low laugh, he said, "High Lord, how have you been?"

Lord Longyang's face 'bloomed like a flower'. "Shaolong! You really came!"

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly made a shushing gesture with his hands. In a quiet voice, he said, "Don't startle anyone here."

Only now did Lord Longyang come to his senses. Distressed, he said, "Shaolong, why did you come to Daliang, much less reveal your presence? Now the King has ordered a regiment of twenty thousand crack troops to enter the city and search for your whereabouts."

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "Your King seems to have forgotten that he is King, and also wed his beloved Empress, thanks solely to the efforts of I, Xiang Shaolong!"

An incomparably complex look flashed by Lord Longyang's 'elegant eyes'. Forcing out a laugh, he said, "In order to protect and preserve all that he now possesses, the King

would be willing to sacrifice his own parents, much less you." Letting out another sigh, he said, "Shaolong, you are too formidable! You defeated us so often that we are now afraid of you. Now, all of the Six Kingdoms know that so long as Xiang Shaolong exists, it will be very difficult for us to protect our countries. Under the specter of our countries being ruined and our families perishing, what would you do, Shaolong, if you were in our positions?"

Xiang Shaolong looked deeply into his eyes. Calmly, he asked, "And what about you, Lord Longyang?"

Lord Longyang trembled slightly. His head lowering, he said, "Even if I risk my life, I shall treat Shaolong as I always have."

Xiang Shaolong said, "High Lord, you have not disappointed me! It can be said that right now, in Daliang, I am friendless and without allies. Only you, High Lord, have the power to secretly, mysteriously deliver me from this city."

Lord Longyang said, "Where do you want to go?"

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a long moment, then replied, "I want to go to the Kingdom of Zhao. I am much more familiar with that region, and it's much easier to return to Qin from there. Hah! Do you have anything to eat or drink, by the way?"

Lord Longyang said, "That's not a problem. I'll order my servants to prepare some food. I'll just say that I'm hungry."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Don't startle anyone. Some water and some pastries will be enough."

Lord Longyang said, "Can it be that you don't even trust me anymore?"

Xiang Shaolong apologetically said, "That's not what I meant. But it's always best to be careful. Is there anyone else here?"

Lord Longyang replied, "Only two serving boys. They should be asleep on the second floor. Wait here a while. I'll go downstairs to pick up some pastries for you." Pushing the door open, he left.

Xiang Shaolong saw that as he left the room, his hands trembled slightly. In his heart, Xiang Shaolong sighed. He knew that he had probably made a mistake by coming here tonight.

Without the assistance of Lord Longyang, he couldn't come up with any other ideas as to how he could leave Daliang.

And now, he had to worry about Lord Longyang dispatching people to apprehend him. Fortunately, he had already prepared for this eventuality and had prepared an escape path.

His heart aching, he pushed the window open and once more clambered down. When he arrived at the bottom floor, Lord Longyang also had just arrived at the lowest floor.

Sneaking a peek into the window, he saw Lord Longyang, tears silently streaming down his face, retrieve a bottle from some hidden location and scatter some sort of powder from inside the bottle onto the tea kettle.

Seeing the actions of this 'friend' of his, Xiang Shaolong's hands and feet grew cold. He deeply regretted this visit.

But he didn't have any other choices, aside from seeking out Lord Longyang. And even now, in his heart, he didn't feel the slightest bit of reproach towards Lord Longyang for betraying him.

After seeing this, Xiang Shaolong returned to Lord Longyang's bedroom on the third floor, pretending to have been sitting there quietly the entire time, waiting for Lord Longyang's return.

Having wiped his tears dry, Lord Longyang entered, holding the tray of delicacies and the tea kettle which he had scattered the powder into.

As the two sat down, Xiang Shaolong ravenously wolfed down all of the food, then suddenly pretended to have heard something. In a low voice, he said, "I think someone is coming!"

Frowning, Lord Longyang said, "How could anyone be coming?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Just now, I thought I heard someone outside. Go take a look and see if I was mistaken."

Lord Longyang didn't suspect a thing. Rising, he strode towards the window and looked outside.

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to grab the kettle of tea and poured all of it out onto the floor near his feet, then put it back.

Lord Longyang looked in all directions but naturally saw nothing at all. Returning to the table, he sat down and said, "There's no one there."

Xiang Shaolong sighed. "Nowadays I'm filled with suspicion. Even when I hear the wind blow and the grass sway, it feels as though I am being pursued by soldiers." After speaking, he grabbed the kettle of tea and pretended to drink it all in one go.

A look of utter sadness appeared in Lord Longyang's eyes, and he didn't speak.

Xiang Shaolong patted himself on the stomach. "What's the situation with Li Mu's counterattack on Zhongmou?"

Lord Longyang laughed bitterly. "You should know better than me. Aside from you, who can take down Zhongmou in a single strike as though it were naught but flipping one's hand around? I also heard that, in his attempt to capture you, Li Mu also suffered the loss of a regiment of men. For now, with it snowing so heavily, it'll be difficult for the Qin reinforcements to come. Once the spring comes and the flowers bloom, the Qin reinforcements will come and Li Mu will be forced to retreat."

Xiang Shaolong felt relieved. Rubbing his forehead, he said with 'surprise', "I don't know if it's because I've been too exhausted, but I'm starting to feel woozy and sleepy."

In a low voice, Lord Longyang said, "Then go to sleep for a while! In the morning, I'll come up with something to send you out of the city."

Xiang Shaolong, acting as though walking was very difficult for him, allowed himself to be escorted by Lord Longyang to the pallet.

Yawning twice, he pretended to have passed away.

After Lord Longyang called his name twice, he leaned over Xiang Shaolong's body and wept bitterly for a while. Sighing, he said, "Shaolong, please don't blame me. For the sake of Great Wei, I have no choice but to do what I do."

After Lord Longyang opened the door and left, Xiang Shaolong sprang to his feet and quickly departed.

When he scaled down the wall and landed on the ground, Xiang Shaolong felt an incomparable sense of loneliness and solitude.

Right now, the best place to hide would be, without a doubt, the royal palace. Because the palace was large, well-populated yet strictly restricted, nobody would dare to mount a search inside.

But because the royal palace was surrounded by particularly tall walls and backed by a river, he could only gaze upon it but not enter.

When he thought about the palace, his heart was moved as he suddenly remembered those passageways located underneath the former residence of Prince Xinling, with which he was so familiar.

Although Lord Wuji of Wei had been forcibly pulled into the grave by King Anli as a funeral companion, his mansion

remained. If it had a new master, that would be even better. Perhaps the new owner of the mansion didn't know anything about the tunnels underneath.

How could he dare delay? Seizing the opportunity afforded to him by the still-falling snow, he raced towards the not-too-distant manor of Lord Xinling.

If he were Lord Longyang, upon finding himself missing, he definitely wouldn't raise too big of a fuss openly. All he would do would be to hoarsely swallow the entire story and keep it hidden within his belly. Otherwise, the King of Wei might criticize and penalize him for dereliction of duty in letting Xiang Shaolong escape.

Within an hour, he had arrived at the secret forest located at the north wall of Prince Xinling's mansion and had found that secret tunnel entryway.

He remembered how, in the past, he had carried the beautiful Third Princess Zhao Qian out of this tunnel in their escape. When he thought of her gentle disposition, totally free from the filthy aura that pervaded the court of the Zhao kingdom, a hundred different feelings swelled up in his breast.

Sick at heart and downcast, he felt for the edges of the steel board covering the tunnel and experimentally gave it a tug.

The steel board lifted in his hands.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but stay there, transfixed.

He had just thought of the tunnels and decided to give it a try. He hadn't expected to really be able to pull the steel covering off with a tug.

All tunnels are designed with the intention of being used as an escape route in times of peril. This is why they are all designed to be opened from within, and not from without. What the current state of the exit showed was that someone had fled from this tunnel, but no one had relocked it from the other side. From this, one could deduce that the mansion most likely had a new master now, one who didn't know of the existence of these tunnels.

Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of exultation. Entering the tunnel, he closed the opening.

From his pocket, he withdrew a flint and struck it to make sparks of flame.

Underneath the flickering light of the flames, the tunnel seemed to stretch off infinitely into the distance.

Remembering how the tunnels were linked together with the copper listening tubes in Lord Xinling's bedroom, Xiang Shaolong walked quietly and slowly on tiptoes in the opposite direction.

This time, he was particularly careful. He noticed that aside from the tunnel leading to the residence where Lord Shaoyuan stayed, there were three other exits as well, naturally going to different residences within the manor. After walking for about a hundred feet, he suddenly had a premonition and looked down.

Two pieces of yellow gold glittered, reflecting the light from his torch.

Xiang Shaolong reached down and plucked them up, placing them in his hands. He suddenly understood.

Previously, when Prince Xinling had been given the poison wine to drink, he knew that it would be hard for him to avoid this disaster. Thus he had given the order for his beloved concubines and relatives to take his valuables and treasures and flee for their lives via these tunnels, and they did so, slipping out by the hidden forest next to the stone wall.

One could imagine how, in the terror of the moment, as everyone was fleeing for their lives, nobody would even notice if they dropped two pieces of gold.

Right now, Xiang Shaolong was in dire need of money. With these two pieces of gold, his situation naturally had changed drastically. At the very least, he could easily buy a horse to ride.

Placing the gold within his pouch, he continued to move forward until he finally arrived at the wide-open door of what appeared to be a treasury.

Inside was a scene of utter chaos. Not a single bit of gold or jewelry was left behind. Only things such as jade horse carvings, ceremonial cauldrons, and precious weapons remained, enough that in the twenty first century, the collection would be considered a first class collection of antiques.

The four walls of the room all had lamps affixed to them, and there was even a big vase of lamp oil hanging in one corner. Xiang Shaolong felt joy in his heart. Blowing out the flame, he sat down, leaning against a wall, the room now so dark that he couldn't even see his own hand in front of him.

He was, at least for now, in a totally safe spot.

But how would he be able to escape from the capital city of the country of Wei? There were more than two severe months of winter remaining. Would he have to hide in this lightless, sunless hole for more than two months? If he had to go out every day to forage for food, then as the saying goes, 'the more one goes up the often, the more likely one would run into a tiger'. Sooner or later, he would be caught.

But for the moment, he had no free time to think about these troublesome problems.

Only in his dreams, now, could he reunite in song and with drink with his beloved wives and son.

For their sake, he would definitely persevere to the end. He would make sure that he would survive to meet with them again.

CHAPTER 6

Hard to Move a Single Step

[Translated by REN WO XING]

WHEN Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes, all he could see nothing but utter darkness. Although he was unable to differentiate between night and day, his head still felt dizzy and he wanted to continue to sleep.

He had been startled awake by the sound of someone speaking. At first, he felt shock, thinking that someone had discovered him. Then, he saw that the tunnel remained unchanged, with the sound coming from one corner of the

secret room. Only then did he understand that the voice was coming from one of the copper tubes.

Since the copper hearing tube could be used to overhear what was being said in the secret room, of course it could be used to overhear what was being said in the room above.

Xiang Shaolong took out one of his few remaining matches, struck it, and lit one of the lamps. The copper tube suddenly appeared in front of him.

It was located next to the entrance, glimmering under the light.

Xiang Shaolong roused his spirit and carefully snuck towards the hearing tube, then pressed his ear against it.

He heard a male voice laugh lecherously, "Your body has become more and more voluptuous. No wonder his royal highness was so enraptured with you the other day."

An unwilling female voice replied, "High Lord, if you were to decide to give me to his highness, I would rather go ahead and commit suicide."

Xiang Shaolong inwardly praised this woman, who deeply understood how men felt. Even though she knew and accepted the fact that she was to be gifted to someone else, she still put on an act of being unwilling to acquiesce.

Indeed, the sound of a gentle, lingering kiss could be heard from upstairs.

The female coquettishly said, "High Lord, didn't you have a banquet that you needed to attend? Yet you insist on teasing me right now instead."

As he listened, Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a great sense of shock.

If this was time for a dinner banquet, he must have slept for half a night followed by a full day. He must have slept for at least twenty or so hours. How could he still be so sleepy? For a time, he forgot to eavesdrop on the two above as he pondered this.

He came to the sudden realization that although the tunnel had openings, there still wasn't much airflow. If he hadn't been startled awake, it was very possible that he would have died of asphyxiation in his dreams.

He suddenly heard three words, 'Xiang Shao Long' enter his ears. He hurriedly began to listen again. That high lord said, "The city is in a total state of uproar right now. All banquets, large or small, have been cancelled thanks to that Xiang Shaolong. His highness has ordered that any residence found to be harboring Xiang Shaolong without reporting him will suffer the penalty of having their entire family line exterminated. Hah, there's no corpse worth more money than that of Xiang Shaolong's. The head by itself is worth five hundred taels of gold. Everyone has exhausted themselves searching for this fellow."

The woman said, "In my humble opinion, he must have left the city long ago. Otherwise, how could it be possible that

with all of Daliang in such an uproar and searching for him, neither hide nor hair of him can be found?" Sighing, she added, "This person is so formidable. He comes as he pleases and goes as he wishes. Nobody can stop him."

That high lord sighed along with her. "It was easy enough for him to slip away, but he's caused Lord Fan to be exhausted on his account. Since today he was unable to capture Xiang Shaolong, as the city watch commander, all of the responsibility is now coming crashing down on his head. Just now he came to beg for my help to ask his highness for forgiveness. But right now, the King is filled with rage. I'm not so stupid as to draw trouble to myself." He added, "Xiang Shaolong really came at the most inopportune time. He wore me out and forced me to miss Feng Fei's exquisite performance. I hear that tomorrow she will be going to the country of Qi. Who knows when she will be back? Tomorrow I simply must go send her off."

Only then did Xiang Shaolong learn that the head of the Three Famous Courtesans, Feng Fei, was currently in the city of Daliang. His heart was moved, and he had no desire to listen any further. Leaving the treasury room, he snuck out of the tunnel and hid himself near the grove outside of it, so as to breathe some fresh air.

It really was around the sunset time outside. Even a few specks of snow could be seen drifting down.

Right now, the only safe place for him was this tunnel. But if he were to be found again, it would be impossible for him to escape.

Lord Longyang clearly had yet to divulge the fact that they had met, as if he had, that high lord from just then would have mentioned it. But even though this was the case, this wasn't of much help to him.

He thought of Feng Fei again.

This beautiful woman with a unique aura. If she were willing to help, maybe she could bring him out of the city.

But they had only met once and their relationship was very shallow. Would she risk her own life to save him? What was even more headache-inducing was the fact that he didn't even know where she lived.

Even if he knew, to sneak into her room would be a trivial matter. As he continued to think, his heart grew numb. Just at this moment, the sound of a dog baying came from the inner courtyard.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. He hurriedly dived into the tunnel again. Based on his memory of the above-ground structures, he rushed out of an exit and arrived at a garden within a courtyard house.

Lights were seen coming from the front of the courtyard house only. The other parts of the house were all dark and unlit.

Xiang Shaolong guessed that the vicious dog was still leashed within the inner courtyard and had yet to be released. Relieved, he moved about freely.

Using his grappling hooks and his nimble hands, at a single go he traversed multiple houses. Dodging several servants, he first snuck into the kitchen and procured sufficient provisions for himself along with a kettle of hot tea before sneaking back into the tunnel. After filling his stomach, his fighting spirit became vigorous again.

Neither the tunnel nor Daliang itself was a place that he could stay for long.

But he still had yet to come up with a method to leave the city safely.

When all of the servants and scouts had finished searching the entire city without any success, they would surely guess that he had hidden himself in some secret location.

There was no lack of intelligent men in the nation of Wei. Lord Longyang himself was an extremely perceptive person. Sooner or later, he would think of the secret passages and the listening tubes that passed by the former Lord Xinling's manor and would also come to the conclusion that there might be still-undiscovered passageways in the tunnels. If he were to only occasionally pop out to steal some food or snacks, it shouldn't be a problem, but in the long run, suspicions would still be raised.

After thinking of these two problems, he made up his mind that within two days time, he must leave the city. Else, he could forget about leaving ever again.

After making sure that the bedroom above the treasury was empty, he snuck up, opened a chest, and took out a set of winter garments and cloak. Just as he was preparing to leave, the sound of footsteps could be heard coming from outside the room, followed the sound of someone sitting down and faintly laughing.

Xiang Shaolong's heart was moved, and he edged closer to the door. Pulling it slightly open, he snuck a peek outside.

He was absolutely shocked at what he saw.

Three people were seated outside, followed by nearly ten close confidantes. Everyone's face showed signs of worry.

One of them was actually Lord Longyang.

His face was ashen pale, and he seemed to have suddenly aged many years. He looked wan and pallid, and no longer seemed like the 'liquid, gentle beauty' of before.

Of the other two, one was an army general in military regalia, while the other was middle-aged man in a minister's garbs.

The general was the first to speak. "We came to speak with you, Lord Pingqu, regarding our efforts to locate Xiang Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong's heart grew cold. He knew that Lord Longyang must have already deduced that he was hiding here.

Surprised, that Lord Pingqu said, "General Fan, how has your search for Xiang Shaolong ended up here in my residence?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Xiang Shaolong recognized him as the man who was taking liberties with his concubine the other day.

The reason that they were speaking in the inner rooms rather than in the main room showed that they were afraid of the news leaking out.

That showed that they had already concluded that he was hiding here.

He suspected that this General Fan, the commander of the city watch of Dalian, had already ordered men to surround the entirety of Lord Xinling's manor.

But he still wasn't concerned, because the exit near the hidden grove was far from Lord Xinling's manor and would definitely not be easy to discover.

Lord Longyang sighed. "General Fan is willing to use his own head as the guarantee that Xiang Shaolong has yet to leave the city. If he is still hiding in the city, the most likely hiding place would be here."

Xiang Shaolong heard him speaking in such a dispirited manner and knew that he felt tormented by the fact that he

had to capture his 'old friend'. He couldn't help but sigh along with Lord Longyang.

Lord Pingqu's expression changed. "Impossible. Long ago, I ordered my servants to search every inch of the manor. If he was here, he couldn't have hidden from me, much less the noses of my hounds."

General Fan said, "We have questioned the former subordinates of Lord Xinling. We verified that in the past, Xiang Shaolong must have used some sort of tunnel-like passageway to escape. But no one knows where the entry point and exit point are."

Lord Longyang added, "Lord Pingqu, you could go and ask every single person in the manor if they had noticed any food or clothing gone missing. From this, you would be able to determine whether or not Xiang Shaolong is hiding here."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised this move as being formidable. How could he dare to stay behind and listen for any longer? He hurriedly snuck back down again and closed the lid, covered it with the previous woven mattresses, then returned to the tunnels.

And then, without a second thought, he snuck out towards the direction of the hilly grove.

In the midst of the snowy night, he could see soldiers light torches as they moved in the direction that he was hiding. The light of the torches and the howls of the dogs were enough to freeze a man's blood.

Xiang Shaolong put all of the stolen food in one large parcel, put the parcel on his back, then went on the road he had once taken to escape with Zhao Qian, moving in the direction of the nearby houses.

He looked around as he walked, secretly groaning.

All of the nearby roads had soldiers sealing off the passageways. Even the rooftops all had sentries installed, focusing their attention on any and all activity within Lord Xinling's manor.

Xiang Shaolong felt as though it had become hard for him to take a single step. He fell down within an underbrush next to the road.

But he quickly decided that this wasn't a safe plan either.

A troop of fifty Wei soldiers was headed in his direction. Poking their spears into every bush, they were carrying out an all-encompassing search, as thorough as a flood of mercury.

Xiang Shaolong had no other options. Before the light had reached him, he clambered towards a nearby street and hid underneath the eaves of a roof.

Because this building was a floor lower than all the surrounding buildings, no sentries were set on its roof.

The soldiers passed. Just as he was dithering over whether or not to sneak into the building, the sound of hoof steps could be heard.

A gaudily-decorated carriage was coming from the direction the soldiers had gone towards, with cavalymen escorting it front and behind.

Watching the situation, Xiang Shaolong landed on the ground again. Dodging and hiding behind a nearby tree, he quickly climbed up onto a particularly thick branch, tightly gripping the ice-covered branch with his hands.

If it weren't for the fact that it was snowing heavily right now, he wouldn't have dared to take this risk.

This could be described as a gamble.

If just a single person amongst those ten plus cavalymen lifted their heads, they would definitely see him.

But when it was snowing ferociously, everyone would lower their gaze towards the ground instead.

Just as it seemed as though his heart would leap into his mouth, the carriage arrived directly beneath him.

Xiang Shaolong first gently set unwrapped the package on his back, then gently tossed it slightly in front of the top of the carriage. He then gently swung his legs down, resting them on the package, before letting his hands slip as he dropped down.

Because of the cushioning package, he landed on the carriage noiselessly. Just by bending down, he had accomplished something which was nearly impossible under any other situation.

The carriage continued to move forward into this ancient, snow-filled capital, slowly and unhurriedly.

He had no idea as to where the carriage would take him, but he knew that for now, he had escaped a dangerous place.

As they passed one of the gates, not only did the sentries not block the carriage's path, they even saluted respectfully as they allowed it to past beyond freely.

The status of the person inside the carriage surely was not that of an ordinary person. Otherwise, how could they be so courteous and respectful?

Right now, even he was curious as to what sort of nobleperson sat inside the carriage below.

The sound of a sigh seemed to drift in from the carriage.

His curiosity aroused, Xiang Shaolong pressed his ear against the carriage. But the accumulated ice and snow froze him so much that he immediately abandoned this idea.

Instead, he turned around and stared around himself.

As he stared, he was struck dumb.

My heavens! It appeared as though the carriage was winding its way through the streets in the direction of the palace.

Escorted by the guards, the carriage passed onto the drawbridge, through the moat, and into the inner palace.

In this era, regardless of size or stature, all palaces were considered forbidden zones.

All kings would exhaust themselves and their resources in making their palace an exceptionally centralized military stronghold, a castle within a castle.

This was designed to prevent invaders from attacking, but also to prevent traitors from rebelling.

Now that Xiang Shaolong had managed to get himself into the royal palace, it would be very difficult for him to leave.

Both startled and exulted, he entered the palace. He continued to lie on top of the carriage, unmoving. He allowed the snow to cover him completely. If it weren't for that, any of the sentries on top of the palace walls would see him right away and he would have nowhere to hide.

But this was precisely what worried him the most.

A huge blizzard like this was very rare. It would be very difficult for him to use this trick again to leave the palace.

Hiding underneath the snow, he pressed his face against his supply package. This could be said to be his sole remaining source of comfort.

Although he couldn't see anything, he could still hear sounds.

From the sound of the horse steps and the carriage wheels, he surmised that they were in the winding paths within the palace. They should be headed in the direction of the inner palace.

The carriage finally came to a halt. The cavalymen all dismounted. Footsteps could be heard from all directions, followed by the inner palace maids saying in chorus, "May the Queen live ten thousand years!"

Xiang Shaolong nearly let out a cry of shock. He couldn't resist from lifting his head up slightly and sneaking a peek.

The carriage door swung open.

Underneath the snow, Dan Meimei's familiar, alluring back, dressed in gaudy clothes, wearing a 'phoenix headpiece', appeared in front of his eyes as though stepping out of a dream.

A maid raised an umbrella over her head while offering her elbow for support. They slowly ascended a set of palace steps, followed by the palace maids and the guards in two rows. The sort of dignified aura she now had made it impossible for others to believe that she was a prostitute in Xianyang who was plucked at will by powerful officials.

Watching her back slowly disappear into the distance as she ascended the stairs, Xiang Shaolong felt a hundred emotions in his heart.

Although he knew that Dan Meimei wouldn't betray him, it was very difficult for him to come into contact with beauty who had now become a Queen.

It was too risky. And maybe Dan Meimei would betray him, after all, just like Lord Longyang.

The sound of whips being cracked.

Xiang Shaolong continued on this free-of-charge tourist trip. Right now, the carriage was definitely headed towards the stables. After the four strong horses were unsaddled, the carriage would be sent to the warehouse where all the snow would be brushed off. If he didn't leave before that, his hiding place would be exposed.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was despairing over how he would leave the carriage, the carriage arrived at a place where trees lined both sides of the road.

Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed that heaven was assisting him. He carefully began to rise, readying his package.

At a moment when he saw that the carriage driver was wholly focused on the road ahead, he stood up.

The snow on his body slid off like sandstone. He reached out and grabbed a vertical branch, immediately escaping this carriage which had taken him out of one dangerous situation but delivered him into another.

CHAPTER 7

Leisurely Chatting Within the Forbidden Palace

[Translated by REN WO XING]

USING his grappling hook and the cover of snow, Xiang Shaolong traversed past two palatial buildings and landed within a grassy knoll located inside a courtyard.

This building was located directly behind the mansion which Dan Meimei had entered earlier. Most likely it was the place where palace servants and maids resided.

He wasn't worried about running into guards or hounds here, as those would only be stationed outside of the royal palace.

All imperial palaces, whether it be the Zhao palace, the Qin palace, or the Chu palace, were unique places, totally segregated from the universe around them.

Unless the King of Wei came to grace Dan Meimei with his presence, he wouldn't run into the King of Wei here either.

Right now, the most important thing was to find a place to hide. Only then could he seek out opportunities to procure food and find a way to escape.

Right now, he felt that the best option available was to hide for ten days or half a month. After the hullabaloo had subsided, he would sneak out the palace.

But just as Lord Longyang said, if he continued to steal food and drinks over a long period of time, sooner or later suspicions would be raised.

The ideal option would of course be to masquerade as a palace servant, but asking him to disguise his much taller and stronger than average body frame into a weak, delicate servant's frame would be nothing more than the ravings of a madman.

Glancing around him, Xiang Shaolong saw that the wind and the snow continued to silently fall down everywhere. But light shone from each and every one of the side rooms.

Earlier, after he had traversed the various mansions, he had already memorized the various buildings like the back of his hand.

These various buildings which surrounded the central palace grounds were themselves surrounded by walls, forming an independent world.

Aside from the sentries stationed on the four surrounding walls, the only guards present were the ones stationed at the entry and exit points. No other security was present.

Dan Meimei naturally would have her own personal guards as well, but they were neither allowed to nor would attempt to enter her dwellings.

So, if he was able to sneak into this beauty's palace, he would be in the safest of positions.

Right now, he was ensconced with an open air garden. There were gates to the east and the south, but the gates were guarded and tightly shut.

After having determined his path of movement, he made up his mind and once more flipped onto the roof.

Although the rooms of the servants were covered with ice and snow, it wasn't a third as thick as that of the city walls. In addition, the eaves of the rooms had many locations which his grappling hook could attach to. Although it was not easy to move precisely, the difficulty was hardly insurmountable for him.

When he reached the gardens located next to the inner palace, he dropped down.

Based on the architectural standards of this era, most palaces would be constructed in a place with lots of light and with intersecting river systems.

The palace of the King of Wei was basically based on an array of intersecting lines. It could roughly be divided into the front, middle, and rear districts. Arranged in a rectangular shape, it sat with its rear in the north and facing the south. The northern district was divided into fifteen sections, with the King and Queen's imperial residences occupying the primary position in the middle.

The central district was where the 'Three Courts' were held.

The 'Three Courts' referred to the Large Court, the Outer Court, and the Inner Court. Although the names were different, they basically were places where the monarch and his councilors took care of governmental affairs.

The southern district held the main gate to the palace as well as the headquarters of the local guard force. It was separated from the primary palaces by a series of five gates.

The reason why Xiang Shaolong paid so much attention to the layout of the palace was because he knew that most palaces had secret passages.

This was something which the nobility of this age would definitely install, in order to save their lives and flee as necessary.

Logically, the King of Wei's palace should also have this sort of underground escape route. If he could find it, he could sneakily and stealthily depart the capital.

Dan Meimei's personal rooms most likely had this sort of escape route as well. Most likely, there was at least a 90% chance of one.

With the 'lock opening tools' hidden within his shoes, and his previous lockpicking experience, the locks of this day and age would absolutely pose no great difficulty to him.

As long as he could find Dan Meimei's personal rooms, he would be able to easily slip away.

He contentedly hid within a cluster of underbrush, focusing on observing the activities of the palace.

Dan Meimei had just returned not too long ago. Naturally, she would first bathe and change her clothes before retiring to her bedroom.

Right now, in the palace, the only place that was lit was the place in front of him. This logically indicated that Dan Meimei hadn't yet gone to sleep.

The blizzard began to weaken, and Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed that this was not a good sign. He decided to first slip into Dan Meimei's personal rooms.

He scurried out of his hiding place and moved beneath the window of what appeared to be a stockroom. After ascertaining that nobody was within, he plucked out the

miniature iron prybar from within his shoes and slid it into the opening within the window, forcing it up.

After leaping into the room, he closed the window.

After accustoming himself to the illumination within the room, he saw rays of light peeking out from behind the door. Moving to the door, he pressed his ear against it to listen.

There was no sound from outside the door. Just as he was about to push the door open, footsteps suddenly could be heard coming from the left.

Xiang Shaolong was startled. He secretly exclaimed, 'How dangerous!' He hurriedly retreated and hid behind a large cabinet.

After the footsteps died away, Xiang Shaolong stepped forward. Pushing the door open, he carefully looked outside.

There was a long hallway outside, with three doors on each side of the hallway. It seemed as though this was where Dan Meimei's personal serving maids resided.

Xiang Shaolong felt that this was a miserably tough situation. If he simply charged out, if he ran into anybody, he would have nowhere to retreat.

But if he refused to take the risk, if Dan Meimei's serving ladies were to tidy the room up or come to the stockroom to retrieve anything, the chances of him running into someone would be even greater.

Grinding his teeth, Xiang Shaolong rushed out.

The inner palace was divided into two sections, with the middle section being an open air garden. Right now, he was located near the rear entrance. The problem right now was that he didn't know if Dan Meimei's bedroom was located in the front section or the rear section. If he knew, he wouldn't have to blindly fumble about like he was doing right now.

He swiftly arrived at a hallway crossing on the right. Just as he was about to enter the front section, two serving girls appeared headed in his direction, a scant few meters away.

Xiang Shaolong quickly drew back. He pushed open the nearest door and snuck inside without even checking to see if anyone was within.

Before he even had the chance to catch his bearings, the door was pushed open again and the two serving girls entered.

Out of options, Xiang Shaolong was forced to hide behind the opened door. All he could do was pray that they wouldn't decide to close it.

Lamps were lit. Only now did he see that he was hiding within the inner palace's dining room.

The two clearly were here to gather some food for Dan Meimei. Busy retrieving and then utilizing some supplies from the nearby cupboards, they didn't even notice in the slightest the presence of this unwelcomed guest.

One of the serving maids said, "She seems to be in an extremely bad mood. This is the first time I've seen her scold someone so ferociously."

The other maid was much less brave. In a low voice, she reprimanded, "Don't speak inappropriate things. If those vile gossips catch wind of it, it'll be terrible."

After a short period of time, the two maids took two trays of tea and snacks and left the room.

Xiang Shaolong leapt out of his hiding spot. He snatched a piece of leftover cake, then, walking on tiptoes, followed the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong used all of his skills, slithering like a snake and scurrying like a rat, moving fast then moving slow. He avoided several passing servants before finally arriving at a main hallway.

The two maids ahead of him entered what appeared to be the inner hallway through a back entrance.

After having found the location of Dan Meimei's bedroom, he hurriedly flipped on top of the roof. Arriving beneath the eaves, he used his steel tools to push a window open, then hurriedly ducked inside.

He had entered a rectangular shaped side room, gaudily decorated with the floor covered by a thick carpet. His feet felt very comfortable stepping onto it.

Because the stove in the corner had yet to be lit, he felt certain that Dan Meimei would not come to this room.

There was a large door in the southern side of the room. Based on the direction it was in, it most likely led to the inner rooms.

By now, he had attained a thorough grasp of the layout of the palace.

The main entrance gateway towards the north led to the main hall, which was followed by two side rooms to each side of the hall.

And Dan Meimei's bedroom must be located towards the south, next to that open-air garden spot. The two rooms next door must be where her servants stayed.

He pressed his ear against the large door and listened intently.

He could hear some indistinct sounds, but not the sound of anyone speaking.

If he were to go seeking the passageway, this was the best opportunity he would have. Once Dan Meimei returned to her bedroom, he would have missed this golden chance.

Xiang Shaolong once more snuck out of this side room. Soon afterwards, he arrived within Dan Meimei's bedroom.

This was a very spacious room with gaudy furnishings. In one corner, the fireplace was burning brightly, causing the room to be as warm as the spring air. In the middle, there was an enormous embroidered bed that was pressed up against the wall, with thick rugs surrounding it.

The other corner of the room, facing the fireplace, was a large screening wall. Naturally, that is where she would go for relieving herself.

All the other dressing tables were filled with all sorts of necessary cosmetic supplies, ordered neatly and successively.

Xiang Shaolong felt a huge headache coming on. Not only would it be difficult to find a secret tunnel in such a location, the very act of trying would immediately be visible and alert others.

The first thing he would have to do would be to lift up the rugs, and maybe even have to move the couches and other furniture around. That would be the same as moving everything in the room. How could others not help but overhear the sounds?

Even if everyone here was deaf, Dan Meimei might enter the room at any time to go to sleep. How could he have the opportunity to put everything back into its proper order?

The most annoying thing of all was that even if he managed to find the tunnel, there was no way he would be able to rearrange everything above into the proper configuration, to the point where nobody would notice that things had been moved. If anyone noticed, it would be as good as directly alerting the soldiers of Wei that he had fled from the tunnel.

Just as he was worrying about what to do, the door opened.

Frightened out of his mind, Xiang Shaolong didn't have any opportunity to flee through the window. All he could do was hide behind the screen and squat down. Next to him, just as suspected, was a delicately made chamber pot and a steel night pot. Fortunately, both the pots were clean and empty, and didn't give off any bad odors.

Sneaking a peek, he saw the person who had arrived was, indeed, Dan Meimei, who had now rose to the exalted position of the Queen of Wei. Behind her was a serving girl who looked somewhat familiar. Only after thinking for a moment did he remember that she was one of the maids who had served Dan Meimei at the Drunken Wind Loft.

Dan Meimei's beauty had blossomed even further.

The exquisitely made formal attire set off her beauty, making up for the aura and presence that she formerly was slightly lacking in.

She gently sat down in front of the copper mirror and allowed the serving girl to remove her formal outer-wear.

The servant said softly, "Madame! Don't worry. A good man like Master Xiang has heaven's blessings upon him. And he is so highly skilled as well. He surely has a way to escape."

Hearing his own name, Xiang Shaolong first felt a huge shock, followed by a feeling of gratitude.

He hadn't thought that a lady of the windy, dusty world (ie prostitution) whom he hadn't previously been on excellent relations with would be more loyal towards him than even

Lord Longyang, just because he had helped her once, with little cost to himself.

Underneath the light of the lamp, Dan Meimei's face didn't reveal the slightest trace of joy, anger, rage, or grief. She tranquilly said, "What use would worrying be. Xiao Qing, the room is too bright."

Sighing, Xiao Qing doused the lamps in the room. The light died down, filling the room with a gentle atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong was indecisive, changing his mind again and again. In the end, he gave up his intention of asking Dan Meimei for assistance. He didn't want to risk causing Dan Meimei to lose everything that she now had.

After she fell asleep, he would sneak out and find a place to hide for the night. The next day, he would return and search for the hidden exit.

After having made up his mind, he snuck another peek from behind the screen.

By now, Dan Meimei was only wearing a single, thin, skin-tight shift that exposed every luscious inch of the lithe, voluptuous lines of her form.

Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed to himself, no wonder so many men of worldly experience were wildly infatuated by her. She really was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, blessed through and through by the heavens.

Dan Meimei let out a dispirited sigh, breaking the stillness that seemed to have taken physical form within the room.

Xiao Qing sighed as well. "I'm afraid that his highness won't be coming tonight."

Dan Meimei gently said, "Right now, all he wants is Xiang Shaolong's head. How could he have the energy to come here. It's very late! Go to sleep!"

Bowing, Xiao Qing pushed the door open and left.

Turning around, Dan Meimei walked towards the screen.

Xiang Shaolong's scalp suddenly felt numb. Dan Meimei and him were now standing face to face, and their four eyes met.

Dan Meimei let out a quiet cry of surprise, then hurriedly used her hand to cover her mouth. A look of shock in her eyes, she stared disbelievingly while shaking her head.

Xiang Shaolong forced out a smile. "Meimei, did I surprise you?"

After stabilizing herself, Dan Meimei stretched out her jade-like hand and grasped his own large hand. She pulled him to the couch.

Moments later, the two of them were firmly ensconced in each other's arms on the embroidered couch.

After offering him a series of hot kisses, Dan Meimei quietly said, "What sort of help do you need from me? Alas! Master Xiang, your abilities really are simply remarkable. You were even able to sneak in here and find me."

Xiang Shaolong didn't originally intend to find her. Somewhat awkwardly, he said, "Meimei, when you went to the screen, were you planning to...heh heh..."

Dan Meimei's face turned red. Tossing him a glare, she clasped him firmly around his back. As though she were in a dream, she said, "Wonderful. I finally have a chance to go to bed with you."

Surprised, Xiang Shaolong said, "Meimei, did you really look upon me with favor?"

Embarrassed, Dan Meimei said, "I'm easily attracted to capable men, but I grow bored easily as well. But towards you, for some reason, it's different. You should know that here and now, there's no reason for me not to speak my mind. Originally, I did hate you. Oh, you horrible man! You never paid me any mind. But I didn't expect that sister Yang Yu was absolutely correct in her assessment of you. You're the sort of man who is cold on the outside but hot inside. Only you were able and willing to help me. I hadn't had the chance to offer you thanks from my own lips!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Hadn't you just thanked me 'with your own lips' just now?"

Fiery color burning in her jade cheeks, Dan Meimei initiated another scorching kiss, before drawing back. Seeming somewhat forlorn, she said, "Are you not interested in me at all? Why don't you have any reaction?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she had a huge amount of experience in handling men. He knew that she had already

noticed that he wasn't showing the normal, expected biological reaction to her attention, and thus was feeling bad about herself. He apologetically said, "For one, I feel that Meimei is a flower who already has a master, whom I shouldn't violate. But more importantly, right now I am surrounded by danger and am worried about how to escape. That's why it's difficult for me to relax with you and enjoy the pleasure that fish feel when they enter the water."

Dan Meimei was relieved, but then she knit her beautiful eyebrows again. "If you were able to enter, you should have the ability to leave as well, right?"

Laughing bitterly, Xiang Shaolong explained how he had entered on top of her carriage.

After listening to him, Dan Meimei nipped him, then said, "Since you have come to my door, naturally I will send you out safely as well."

Enjoying the soft and fragrant feeling of "murmuring quietly in the middle of the night" with this beauty, Xiang Shaolong's heart seemed to have melted. Sighing, he nipped her little ear. "That's too dangerous for you, and there's too many unknown variables at play. I definitely won't let you take that sort of risk."

Dan Meimei felt a surge of emotion. She sighed, "In the entire world, perhaps only Xiang Shaolong would be so considerate. Xiang Shaolong! Hurry up and think of something. As long as I am capable of doing it, I, Dan Meimei, promise you that I will."

Xiang Shaolong tightly embraced her. Pressing his face against her beautiful hair, he inhaled her fragrant scent. His entire body went weak. In a soft voice, he said, "Has your King ever told you about any secret escape routes located within your palace?"

Dan Meimei's slender body trembled. In a lovable voice, she exclaimed, "I almost forgot! There is such a tunnel, and it's located right in my bedroom."

But then, she looked unhappy. "But the key to open it lies in the hands of the Chief Custodian. There's no way for me to open it!"

Elated, Xiang Shaolong said, "That's even better. Even if someone discovered that I had left through the tunnel, you would be able to deny everything."

Surprised, Dan Meimei asked, "You know how to pick locks?"

Xiang Shaolong withdrew slightly from her. Carefully examining her flowery, jade-like countenance that was softened even further by the glow of the lamps, he smiled and nodded. Taking another whiff of her delicate fragrance, he said, "Do you know where the exit to the tunnel is?"

His mood improving, he was starting to succumb to the allure of this comfortable blanket and began to feel a fleshly lust.

Dan Meimei could feel the pressure of him against her side. Her eyes filled with the stirrings of the desire of spring, she gazed at him for a moment before burying herself into his

wide chest and saying, "The King said that the tunnel exit is half a li west of the east city gates, at a stable."

Xiang Shaolong felt that this was wonderful. This would allow him to pick out a fast horse and flee. However, he would still need to exit through the east gates. He suddenly had a thought, and asked her where she had just been.

Dan Meimei tightly embraced him. Her eyes half closed, she murmured, "I went to visit a sister. She'll be leaving Qi tomorrow. Oh, Xiang Shaolong! You don't need to go so urgently! Life here in the palace is so regimented and so stifling. A person can die of boredom in here!"

Xiang Shaolong forced out a smile. "Do you regret coming?"

Dan Meimei opened her beautiful eyes. Staring vacantly, she said, "I don't know! I really don't know! Just yesterday, I dreamt of the Drunken Wind Loft, and dreamt of playing games with sister Yang Yu in its garden! Oh! How has she been?"

Xiang Shaolong felt a bitter feeling in his heart. He asked, "Does he treat you well?"

Dan Meimei was speechless for a long moment, then said, "I'm not sure either. Ever since he became the King of Wei, he became very ferocious. Even while he is sleeping, in his dreams, he would sometimes call for the execution of some minister or official who had offended him. If it weren't for the fact that I'm pregnant, perhaps I would beg you to take me with you."

Xiang Shaolong's lust immediately cooled to nothingness and he woke up. He told himself that at such a critical juncture, he needed to preserve his strength. He had just suffered a serious illness not too long ago, making it even more inappropriate for himself to be enjoying himself with Dan Meimei right now. Changing the subject, he said, "Was the sister you just visited the leader of the Three Famous Courtesans, Miss Feng Fei?"

Dan Meimei nodded. "Yes! We even discussed you. She esteems you greatly."

She grew excited. "How about I plead with her to secretly take you outside the city? She is a very capable person!"

Xiang Shaolong abruptly shook his head. "No! I don't want to implicate any more people. Why is she going to the country of Qi?"

Dan Meimei replied, "It's for the King of Qi's 50th birthday. I heard that Shi Sufang and Lan Gongyuan are both planning to go for the celebration. Every country, including even Qin, will be sending representatives to celebrate."

Xiang Shaolong was growing more and more confused as he listened. Surprised, he said, "Aren't Yan and Zhao at war with Qi? How did their relations improve so much?"

Dan Meimei shook her head. "I'm not too sure about these sorts of matters either. From what the King said, it seems as though the King of Qi still hasn't decided who the Crown Prince should be. The choice will implicate Tian Dan's

powerbase, so the King has a decided interest in the question of who the Crown Prince will be.”

Right now, Xiang Shaolong didn’t even have time to take care of himself, much less care about the internal affairs of Qi. In a soft voice, he said, “Dear Meimei! Please tell me where the entrance to the tunnel is!”

Aghast, Dan Meimei said, “Don’t be so quick to leave, alright? I have ways of hiding you here for many days! Wait for the search to die down before leaving. Isn’t that safer?”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her fragrant lips before saying, “No! I need to sneak out now, while the blizzard is still here. Once the snow disappears, it will be impossible for me to leave.”

Unwilling to part from him, Dan Meimei tightly clasped his waist. She mournfully said, “When I embrace you, it feels like I am embracing all of the things which were important to me in the past. But you are so unwilling to remain behind and want to leave so urgently. Xiang Shaolong! Please don’t be so heartless towards me!”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong felt touched. He knew that Dan Meimei hadn’t really fallen in love with him. What she felt towards him was a complicated mixture of gratitude and memories of the past. With the palace being so stifling, she desperately desired for him to stay behind and accompany her.”

But he still felt some degree of empathy for her. He gently sucked on her soft, warm red lips, then gently said, “How could I bear to be heartless towards you? But right now, I

have to save my energy, because I have a very difficult road that I must travel.”

Dan Meimei returned his kiss. Her cheeks as scarlet as the setting sun, she said, “Fine, I won’t force you anymore! But you should at least make an expression of good faith, such as caressing my body. That way, in the future, you won’t easily forget about me, Dan Meimei.”

Listening, Xiang Shaolong felt as though his blood was about to boil.

To tell the truth, in a situation like this, where he was embracing the writhing, naked body of this voluptuous woman filled with the energy of youth, while the gentle, warm smell of the blanket entered his nostrils, if he were to claim that his vessels were not expanding to the point of explosion, he would be lying through his teeth.

He couldn’t help but reach out and place his hand on her firm posterior and let his hand roam about.

Dan Meimei immediately began to breathe rapidly. Like an eel, she began to writhe on his lap, her soft body pressing against him, filling Xiang Shaolong with even more fiery lust.

Xiang Shaolong’s hands increased their roaming area, sliding from her thighs all the way to her petite face. The ineffable process of his hands sliding up filled both of them with the ecstatic, stimulating feeling of having a tempestuous affair.

Xiang Shaolong was like a fully drawn bow, with no choice but to shoot. Just as he was about to press her down

beneath him, Dan Meimei pushed him away. She panted delicately and thinly, "The entrance to the tunnel is beneath the main armoire. There's a trapdoor beneath it. Open that up, and you'll see the locked entrance to the tunnel."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked awake. He felt a sense of gratitude in his heart. He knew that she was afraid of exhausting his strength, which was why she forcibly controlled her own urges.

After sharing a kiss with her that was so scorching, it nearly set the two of them aflame, he jumped off the couch. Just as he was about to push the armoire aside, he suddenly remembered something. "Are there any other entrances?"

Dan Meimei said, "There's two other entrances in the imperial gardens. Everyone in the palace knows about them."

Xiang Shaolong gave her a last hug. "That makes it even better. With multiple entrances, even if someone finds out that I left through the tunnel, nobody would suspect you of any complicity."

After this last, lingering embrace, he finally stepped down into this road which would save his life.

CHAPTER 8

The Song and Dance Troupe

[Translated by REN WO XING & JUSTIN13]

WITHOUT any danger or experiencing anything alarming, Xiang Shaolong exited from the tunnel.

The exit was located at the side of the wall of a large well located inside a horse stable. The exit was located at least seven or eight feet above the surface of the water, and there were footholds leading to the top of the well.

By the time he stuck his head out of the well, the snow had already stopped. Slight hints of light could be seen coming

through the sky. A barn was laid out to his right, along with group homes of several stable hands.

This type of stable was very common, both the state owned ones and the privately owned ones. Most of the horses came from the pastures outside of the city, and were purchased by the rich and influential people of the city.

Xiang Shaolong snuck into the barn. He was wondering whether or not he should steal a horse, but also was concerned that his motivations might be too apparent. Suddenly, voices could be heard. Startled, he hurriedly hid in a corner, covering himself with the sweet grass which was fed to the horses.

Two people came.

One person said, "Master Zhang, please rest your mind. My superiors have long since made arrangements for me to provide you with the finest horse we have. Ah! In all of Daliang, is there anyone who doesn't want to see the world-renowned song and dance of the young lady? For me to be of the slightest assistance to her is a tremendous honor."

The fellow surnamed Zhang clearly knew how to put on airs. He just let out a bored 'humph'. Arriving near to where Xiang Shaolong was hidden, he said, "This horse seems good. Its teeth are uniform and white as snow. What sort of horse is it?"

That stable master said, "This is a purebred horse from the deer pastures of the far north. It's both attractive and hardy. Master Zhang, you have a good eye!"

The fellow surnamed Zhang was silent for a moment, before saying, "Did you find the charioteer I ordered you to locate? This really has been a huge bother to us. A perfectly good employee suddenly became sick and died, forcing me to run about trying to find a replacement."

The stable master said, "How would I dare to slack off in the slightest in my duties for the young lady and for Master Zhang? I already found someone known as Shen Liang. He previously served as the charioteer for Prince Wuji, and is an expert in martial arts as well. He also looks extremely handsome. For sure, he fulfills Master Zhang's criteria."

Continuing, he said in a low voice, "He's an old friend of mine. Master Zhang, I'm sure you understand. Right now, nobody in Daliang dares to use the former subordinates of Prince Wuji. Otherwise, for someone of Shen Liang's talents, how could he remain unemployed for over two years?"

The fellow surnamed Zhang coldly snickered. "Where is he?"

The stable master smiled as well. "He didn't know that Master Zhang would come here so early. I expect he's still sleeping. Master Zhang, why don't you first go to the inner hall and have a hot cup of tea. I'll call him up and have him meet you right away."

The fellow surnamed Zhang said, "How do I have the free time to drink tea? First get the horse for me, and I'll pay you right away. Later, summon that fellow to see me. If he's late, don't blame me for not waiting for him. You'd best know that we have other options for our charioteer as well."

This was followed by the sound of the horse being walked over, then the two of them going to another stable.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that heaven was helping him. He hurriedly put on the clothes that he had previously stolen.

These clothes were the most unattractive clothes in Lord Pingqu's chest of clothes. It was very suitable for the likes of a Shen Liang, someone who was the former servant of a fallen noble house.

By the time he had finished hiding his old clothes in a secret location, the stable master had already left the stable and was headed in the direction of the sleeping rooms. Clearly, he was going to go wake Shen Liang up.

Xiang Shaolong hurried out. Seeing that the fellow surnamed Zhang was staring at four horses, he coughed and bowed all the way to the ground. "Your humble servant, Shen Liang, requests that Master Zhang forgive me for my tardiness."

Master Zhang didn't expect him to arrive so quickly. He glanced at him a few times. A look of satisfaction appearing in his eyes, his gaze dropped to 'Blood Wave', which hung from Xiang Shaolong's waist. He calmly said, "My name is Zhang Quan. I'm the manager for Miss Feng. You had previously served as the charioteer for Prince Wuji, so you naturally know all the rules. Five taels of silver a month, and if Miss Feng is satisfied with you, you can work for us permanently." Zhang Quan was roughly thirty years or so of age, had an intelligent face, but had a very vulgar air to him.

Above his lips were two slanting thick mustaches, giving him the appearance of a man who indulged too much in wine and sex.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly agreed.

Zhang Quan said, "We don't have much time. Let's go. It's about to starting snowing again."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked both the heavens and the earth. Picking up his cloak, he took the reins of the horses and walked them out.

The departure of the city was unexpectedly easy.

The most ironical part of it was that the number of people who came to send them off was vast beyond counting. And yet, he, the most wanted criminal in the city, was able to saunter away in their midst.

Before they had reached the city walls, snow once again began to fall. Putting on his cloak and hood, he wrapped a wind-blocking mask around his face, lowering his head to avoid the wind. Combined with the fact that he was wearing very ordinary and appropriate attire, naturally not a single person suspected him. The most miraculous thing of all was that, as he was seated in the position of the charioteer, nobody could tell that he had a massive, powerful physique.

He was originally afraid that Feng Fei would recognize him, but fortunately, he didn't even have the chance to meet her.

To be honest, right now, with his face covered by a beard, even if Feng Fei paid him any mind, she would be hard

pressed to easily see through the disguise and recognize him as Xiang Shaolong.

It was actually funny, come to think of it. He didn't want to disturb Dan Meimei, but in the end, it was through her assistance that he left the palace. He wanted even less to involve Feng Fei, with whom he had no relationship at all, but in the end, he had to rely on her to help him charge through this final barrier of the city gates.

This could really be described as coming back from death's door.

He hoped that this time, things would go smoothly and he would easily return to Qin.

Naturally, he didn't want to go to Qi. As soon as he saw an opportunity to do so, he would slip away.

The people of Wei were extremely courteous to Feng Fei. They sent an escort of five hundred light cavalry to accompany them, led by General Ao Xiang.

Feng Fei's song and dance troupe was a strong force of many men, fully filling over ten large vehicles. All together, including the dancers, the musicians, and the serving girls, they numbered more than two hundred. Paying their salary alone was certainly an enormous expenditure. From this, one could tell how heavy Feng Fei's income must be. He couldn't help but begin thinking about that world-class beauty seated in the carriage behind him, and began to think about that day where the two of them quietly murmured touching words to each other in the small manor in Qin.

She was the equivalent of a musical superstar of the 21st century. Only, the people who were given the chance to enjoy her music were only the utmost nobility. Ordinary people would almost never have that sort of good fortune.

After the team of carriages left Daliang, it passed through a major ravine and headed straight north. When it arrived at flowing water, there were five huge three-sailed ships awaiting them.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong come to understand why they had to leave so early. By now, it was already sundown.

When he saw the cavalry escort also board the boats, he couldn't help but groan silently.

If he was forced all the way to the country of Qi in such a manner, it would be absolutely terrible for him.

Flowing along with the river, it wouldn't take more than four or five days for the boat to arrive at Qi's borders. By then, if he wanted to return to the Zhao border, it would cost him a huge amount of additional effort.

But he didn't have any other options for the moment. Steeling himself, he boarded the ship.

Of the five large ships, the people of Wei occupied three while Feng Fei and her people occupied two.

Compared to the previous days, where he was facing the soldiers of Wei on a daily basis, Xiang Shaolong felt much more at ease.

The boat he was on was the boat on which Feng Fei lived. At this point in time, his status in the song and dance troupe was the lowest of the low. He was assigned to a room in the bottommost deck, a tiny room with just one window which he had to share with other low-ranked servants. The six of them shared that single room.

Maybe it was because they were jealous of him snatching the prominent position of being Feng Fei's carriage driver, but the others all linked together to shun him. As soon as they entered the room, they would immediately begin to gamble, but they wouldn't invite him to take part.

Xiang Shaolong was more than happy to let the situation remain this way. After dinner, he burrowed onto a sleeping mat in a corner of the room and immediately closed his eyes.

Those people intentionally said mocking words, including words that were designed to denigrate his 'master', Lord Xinling. Xiang Shaolong found their technique of 'pointing at the mulberry tree and insulting the locust tree' (ie, to insult someone by proxy) to be hilarious. He honestly didn't care at all and shortly drifted into a deep sleep.

After sleeping for an unknown period of time, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his upper thigh. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was a charioteer named Gu Ming who had given him a kick.

Furious, Xiang Shaolong sat up and shouted, "What's that for?"

Another charioteer named Fu Yan hugged his knees. With a rascally, gangster-like attitude, he sat leaned against a corner wall and laughed, "Shen Liang, where were you born? Is your last name Zhu (pig)? Otherwise, how could you sleep as deeply as a slaughtered pig?"

The others roared in laughter as well, their voices filled with contempt and mockery.

There was a person there named Fang Sheng. He was the only one who did not mock Xiang Shaolong. He quietly shouted, "Don't mock him. Shen Liang! It's light now. Come with me."

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the rage in his heart and followed him out.

Arriving on the deck, he saw that the sky was growing clear. White clouds drifted about on both sides of the horizon. His heart grew calm, and all of the unhappy thoughts from earlier fled to the back of his mind.

All the servants were in line waiting for their first meal of the day. Another group of people were fetching water to wash themselves. It was noisy all around him, giving off a very lively atmosphere.

A rather attractive female servant, accompanied by two strong-looking women, was in the middle of talking to Zhang Quan. Seeing Xiang Shaolong's majestic physique, a weighing, interested look appeared in her eyes as she thoroughly checked him out.

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely uncomfortable at her searching gaze. Fang Sheng whispered in his ears, "That's the servant girl of our Second Mistress, Dong Shuzhen. Her name is Sister Xiaoling. We all call her the 'Little Chili Pepper'. Relying on the favor of the Second Mistress, she loves to show off her authority. If you don't need anything from her, best not to get involved with her."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong was laughing bitterly. He had always been a person who proudly stood above others. He didn't expect that even amongst the servants, there were differences of rank and seniority.

After washing his face alongside Fang Sheng, it was their turn to get their food. They went to a corner and began to eat and drink.

Fang Sheng said, "Are you still angry about what happened earlier? Honestly, the one they are angry with is Zhang Quan. Gu Ming is a subordinate of the Deputy Manager, Sha Li. The Manager intentionally wanted to dampen their spirits. That's why he hired you, a total newcomer, and gave you this position which everyone else was fighting over. If it weren't for the fact that they fear going too overboard would offend the Manager, you would have even more trouble to bear."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why, despite there being so many people here, he was the one selected to be used. In his heart, he felt very lucky.

Fang Sheng saw him accept this silently. He too stopped speaking.

Xiang Shaolong still felt unhappy in his heart. "Brother Fang, how long have you been with the Mistress?"

Fang Sheng said, "Three years now."

Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to ask him detailed questions about Feng Fei, but he felt it would seem inappropriate. He changed the question. "Brother Fang, do you have a family?"

The corner of Fang Sheng's mouth quirked into a bitter smile. "How can a servant from a vanquished country talk about families or lineages? If it weren't for the Mistress's pity, I, Fang Sheng, most likely would've frozen to death on some street long ago."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a long moment. Finally, he lowered his head and ate. At the same time, he began to ask Fang Sheng one question after another about the song and dance troupe.

At this time, a solidly built male servant came next to Xiang Shaolong. He coldly said, "Are you Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong remembered his current status. He hurriedly stood up and said, "Elder brother, what instructions do you have for me?"

The strong servant arrogantly said, "My name is Kun Shan. I'm Master Zhang's deputy. You can just call me Brother

Shan. I hear that you know how to use the sword. Let me see your sword!"

Although Xiang Shaolong wasn't willing, he had no choice, and could only pull out the sword and offer it.

Who would've thought that Kun Shan's expression would turn ugly. He shouted, "Is your other hand broken?"

Xiang Shaolong almost let him have it with a punch. He could only lift up the sword with both hands and offer it.

Most of the male servants of Feng Fei were outfitted with longswords, and Kun Shan naturally was not an exception. But compared to this precious sword 'Blood Wave', they of course were far inferior.

As soon as Kun Shan saw the sword, his eyes immediately lit up.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was feeling greedy. Not letting the other speak, he immediately said, "This is a precious sword passed down to me by my ancestors. If the sword remains, the man remains. If the sword dies, the man dies as well."

He took the first step to prevent the other from speaking.

A look of utter envy on Kun Shan's face, Kun Shan played with it for a long moment before being willing to return it to Xiang Shaolong. Stiffening his face, he said, "Master Zhang wants to see you. Come with me."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that even the most senior of officials didn't put on airs like these people did. Laughing bitterly inside, he followed the man to the uppermost deck.

This vessel was over three hundred feet long. Compared to the largest warships of the Qin, the 'Great Wings', it was nearly twice as long. That's because this ship was only used to carry freight. It didn't need to be nimble, it only had to be stable.

The hull of the ship was slender and merely twenty feet across. Its head and its tail pointed upwards, and two arching masts were installed near the ship's bow, along with another at the aft.

Between these two mast sections was the cabin, which was divided into three layers. The top layer was built on top of the deck, while the bottom layer was built beneath it.

Feng Fei and a group of song and dance courtesans with status naturally would stay on the uppermost, most comfortable cabin. First class managers and serving girls would stay on the second cabin. People like Xiang Shaolong, with the lowest status, would naturally stay in the lowest, nastiest bottom cabin.

When accounting for the sailors, this ship had at least a hundred people on it, making for a uniquely raucous, lively atmosphere.

By this era, water-borne transportation is already very widespread and developed. Sayings such as "Cannot go on

for a single day if the oars are neglected"³ were already in existence.

Especially in the southern provinces, so full of rivers and streams, water-borne transportation has long been the primary form of transport. In times of constant warfare, a navy is absolutely essential, and even civilian ships are very popular.

In the past, whenever Xiang Shaolong was in a boat, he 'proudly sat on top'. This was his first time experiencing the taste of being one of the 'little people'.

At the moment, Zhang Quan was staring out while leaning against a railing on a terrace. By his side, he had two men who looked like bodyguards. He looked very pretentious.

Xiang Shaolong approached Zhang Quan and saluted him. However, Zhang Quan was indifferent and did not even spare a glance at him. He stood there, enjoying the winter breeze.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. Zhang Quan's arrogance is undeniable and this arrogant behavior has been picked up by his followers as well.

From his conversation with Fang Sheng, he has acquired a general understanding of the Song and Dance Troup.

The top hierarchy naturally goes to the Head of the Three Courtesans, Feng Fei.

³ Translator's note: *Referring to countries which are heavily dependent on maritime trade.*

The next in authority would be twelve other courtesans who are Feng Fei's regular singing and dancing companions. All twelve ladies are number one rated beauties. Among the twelve courtesans, Dong Shuzen, who is also known as Second Mistress, helms the group.

Dong Shuzen is able to stand out from the other courtesans because she is the only other courtesan other than Feng Fei who is able to write songs and compose lyrics.

Troupe Manager Zhang Quan and Assistant Manager Sa Li are leaders too in their own capacity. They are responsible for all affairs pertaining to the Troupe. In addition, Sa Li does recruitment for chariot drivers, food supplies and kitchen helpers. In this instance when Zhang Quan personally recruited Feng Fei's chariot driver, he is opening overriding Sa Li's authority and starting a power tussle between them.

Below the courtesans are the talented musicians and serving maids. Due to their proximity to Feng Fei and the twelve courtesans, they do not hold any appointments but wield considerable authority.

The musicians are lead by Conductor Yun Niang, who is a retired courtesan. She conducts training for new courtesans and is held in the highest regard by Feng Fei. Therefore, no one dares to make trouble for her.

Among the serving maids, Feng Fei's personal maid Little Ping'er and Dong Shuzen's personal maid Sister Ling wield the most influence. Xiang Shaolong has met Little Ping'er in Xianyang and the pretty maid he met earlier on the ship is

Sister Ling. Due to their mistresses positions, even Manger Zhang Quan has to give in to the wishes of the two maids.

Since the establishment of the Zhou Clan(?自周室立邦后), music and entertainment are highly regarded, leading to a thriving industry for Song and Dance Troupes such as these. These troupes often tour the different States and even have annual performances. They are wildly popular and welcomed wherever they travel. For Superstar Troupes such as Feng Fei's, they are treated with the same pleasantries that Lords and Marquises are expected to receive. These dance troupes remain neutral politically and are not affected by the State wars.

After keeping Xiang Shaolong painfully waiting for an extended period, Zhang Quan questioned: "I heard Gu Ming and his guys gave you trouble on several occasions, is it true?"

Not knowing his true intentions, Xiang Shaolong replied: "They are truly not the friendliest people around but I can still take their crap."

Zhang Quan turned around in one swift motion and dissed: "I thought you were a martial arts expert? These kind of trouble should be familiar to you. You were kicked in the butt and yet did not retaliate; what kind of hero are you?"

His two bodyguards and Kun Shan, who was standing behind him began to snigger in agreement and to flatter their boss.

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong explained: "I am concerned that I should not create trouble since I am a newcomer. It may look bad on Master Zhang (Quan) too. If Master Zhang thinks that it is fine to retaliate, I will know how to act the next time."

In fact, only Xiang Shaolong knows about his personal dilemma. When things go out of proportion, he may get the attention of Feng Fei and be identified, blowing his cover. However, it will be really ideal if Sa Li can give him the sack instead when he causes trouble and he can leave the troupe at the next landing.

Despite Dan Meimei's opinion that Feng Fei admires Xiang Shaolong, the human heart is difficult to fathom and no one can indeed tell for sure.

He has finally escaped countless struggles, hardships and his pursuers. There is no way he will risk returning back to his fugitive lifestyle.

Hearing his words, Zhang Quan calmed down.

On his left, the tall bodyguard hinted: "Master Zhang (Quan) considers you worthy and has given you such a good position. You must prove yourself and not make him lose face."

Since he came to ancient China and began his journey initially with Tao Fang, Xiang Shaolong has spent every day in a power tussle. Understanding the hint, he secretly acknowledged Zhang Quan's prowess. This is a brilliant plan to reap rewards without sowing.

His employment is done on purpose, inciting anger from Assistant Manager Sa Li's clique. When things go out of hand, Zhang Quan can report to the courtesans that Sa Li is discriminating against newcomers. He can use the opportunity to reprimand Sa Li and magnify his faults.

Sa Li is on the other ship and has no chance to defend himself. This is definitely an invincible blow to Sa Li.

With just a small effort, he can reduce Sa Li's influence and send a message to all the other troupe workers that Zhang Quan is the most capable around.

It is amazing that such a simple employment is mired in a much larger conspiracy, the power grabbing tactics in the Song and Dance Troupe.

The lifespan of a Song and Dance Troupe is limited. When Feng Fei decides to retire or get married, the troupe will have to disband. On the good side, there are generous retrenchment benefits to all the workers when a troupe disbands. According to Fang Sheng, that is his biggest dream: working till disbandment to receive a windfall.

Behind him, Kun Shan interrupted: "Even if someone is killed, as long as you are not the one who started the fight, Master Zhang (Quan) will stand up for you, understand?"

Speechless, Xiang Shaolong nodded his head with resignation.

Zhang Quan's voice became more accommodating and swore: "As long as you are loyal to me, I, Zhang Quan, will

not treat you shabbily. Look at your skinny frame and yellow skin. I am sure you have had your fair share of trouble over the past two years. Just do your best! Since you have served Wei Wuji (Prince Xinling) before, you should understand my intentions.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that his appearance has drastically changed since he has been on the run. Besides his new beard, he has slimmed down a lot. Even if he came face to face with Feng Fei or Little Ping'er once again, they could hardly identify him.

During their initial meeting at the loft (Drunken Wind Brothel), the lights are dim and most of their time is spent sitting down and chatting. Given the present circumstances and his new look, it is highly possible to evade their recognition.

With this new thought, he felt his happiness surging.

After Zhang Quan left him, Xiang Shaolong returned to the second deck holding but discovered that Fang Sheng is no longer around. He headed towards the ship's hull to look for him and chanced upon the ship's cabins. He entered a narrow corridor along the cabin doors when someone blocked his way and scolded: “Didn't Manager Zhang tell you about the rules? Workers are not allowed to come to the hull. If you frighten the ladies, you will be in for a good time.”

Xiang Shaolong had a shock and looked further ahead. He saw a poutish and yet cute serving maid, staring him down

with her large almond-shaped eyes. Her fierce stare and her arms akimbo reminded him of a tigress.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly apologized and turned back. He retreated back to the ship's lower bunk and fell into a deep sleep.

He woke up to music playing from the upper decks. It must be Feng Fei and the courtesans rehearsing their performances.

The afternoon sun shone in through a small cabin window. He was alone in the bunk.

Xiang Shaolong sat upright with his blanket still snug around him. Leaning against the ship's wall, he was thinking about the lunch service he had missed when Fang Sheng came into the bunk with a bowl of rice that was piled high with green vegetables. Offering him the bowl, he added: "I can tell that you are sleeping very soundly and do not wish to interrupt your sleep. So I prepare a bowl for you especially."

Touched, Xiang Shaolong ate two mouthfuls before enquiring: "Does Brother Fang (Sheng) have any relatives?"

Fang Sheng sat down beside him and was quiet for a few seconds. He then simply announced: "They were all killed in battle!"

From his tone, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew things were much more complicated than what he was sharing.

Fang Sheng has a fine bearing and behaves with a certain class. He could well be the son of a nobleman. When the

country is devastated, he was forced to flee for his life and ended up joining Feng Fei's Song and Dance Troupe as a chef.

Fang Sheng continued: "I have no other ambitions. I just want to make some money, find a quiet place to build a house, buy some fields and become a farmer. I will never want to face these crooks ever again."

Xiang Shaolong observed his haggard features and estimated his age to be about the same as his own. However, they bore scars of numerous toils and hardships. In a sudden burst of sympathy, he nearly wanted to present his two gold ingots as a present to Fang Sheng, fulfilling his dream. He quickly suppressed this unwise thought before turning his attention back to his meal.

Fang Sheng suggested: "At sunset, the ship will dock at Gu City and will raise anchor only tomorrow. Why don't we enter the city and find some chicks to entertain ourselves? If Brother Shen (Xiang Shaolong) is broke, I can always lend you the money first."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "I thought you are saving for your house and your farmland?"

Fang Sheng reasoned: "Some money is meant to be saved, some money is meant to be spent. Lowly beings like us must also find joy in life. We are unlike Zhang Quan and other rich men who can go for top courtesans. We must remember to avoid Gu Ming and his gang. I noticed him whispering to his

family warriors earlier and overheard your name. They may find trouble with you.”

Infuriated, Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort and maintained his silence. He secretly swore to teach them a lesson they will never forget. Otherwise, he will always be at their mercy.

He checked himself for having such foolish thoughts.

If he do not use this golden opportunity to make good his escape, he will be a really big idiot.

CHAPTER 9

Battle for Power

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE SKY is still lighted when the ships docked at Gu City pier.

A jubilant Fang Sheng is about to lead Xiang Shaolong into the city for some entertainment when Zhang Quan summoned: "Miss Feng needs the carriage. Prepare it now."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: "Where is the carriage?"

Zhang Quan is displeased: "Are your eyes only good for looking at butts? Can't you see the carriage at the pier?"

The words have barely left Xiang Shaolong's mouth when he knew he is in for a scolding.

The carriage may be transported in the other ship but it has already been driven down to the pier. Xiang Shaolong is overly anxious to escape and wasn't watching his words.

Fang Sheng secretly nudged him and Xiang Shaolong knowingly followed Fang Sheng down the gangplank, disembarking from the ship.

He was in a state of confusion and out of a sudden; he was viciously pushed from behind. Before he could figure out what is happening, Xiang Shaolong lost his balance and fell forward, knocking heavily into Fang Sheng.

Both men staggered and half roll, half fell down the gangplank onto solid ground. If not for the railings at the side of the gangplank, they could possibly fall into the river.

Xiang Shaolong climbed back onto his feet while Fang Sheng is clutching his left with a contorted expression on his face. The pain is causing him to break into cold sweat.

Loud laughter is heard from the ship.

Gu Ming and the other chariot drivers were jeering and laughing at their misfortune. They were accompanied by a short but muscular strongman.

Someone called out: "Shen Liang, I initially thought you are tall and well built, but today I finally realize you are just an empty vessel, a tool without a purpose. Just a small accidental bump from our Brother Wu Xun is good enough

to cause you to turn topsy turvy. And I thought you are supposed to be an expert martial arts practitioner.”

Xiang Shaolong recognised the speaker to be Fu Yan, one of Gu Ming’s key confederates. Concurrently, he committed the family warrior Wu Xun’s name to memory.

Zhang Quan appeared at the stern of the ship. He bellowed to Gu Ming and his gang: “What is going on?”

Gu Ming casually replied: “The two of them don’t even know how to disembark a ship, it is no issue of mine.”

Following that, his group scampered down to the pier and fled into the distance.

Zhang Quan furiously glimpsed at the mud ridden and disheveled Xiang Shaolong before cursing: “Useless fellow!” He turned around and disappeared.

Xiang Shaolong is genuinely angry now. He silently helped Fang Sheng up. The poor Fang Sheng is groaning: “My leg! I think it is broken!”

How Xiang Shaolong wished he could give chase after Gu Ming and his gang, killing every single one of them to appease his anger. He apologized: “I have caused you misfortune!”

Fang Sheng bitterly smiled: “I guessed they want to injure you and prevent you from driving the carriage. Ai! Looks like our plans for tonight have to be cancelled!”

By now, several other troupe workers have arrived at their position, assisting Xiang Shaolong to move Fang Sheng back on the ship.

Upon reaching the deck, a female voice rang out: "What the hell are you guys up to? How dare you block Miss Feng's path?"

Xiao Shaolong saw the danger and quickly lowered his head and bowed. At the same time, he moved Fang Sheng to the side.

He stole a quick peep and saw a veiled Feng Fei standing right in front of him. Beside her is Little Ping'er who is stilled dressed up as a boy. They are escorted by four other maids and about a dozen family warriors. The courtesan is assessing Xiang Shaolong.

Little Ping'er, who has apparently failed to recognise Xiang Shaolong, was incensed. "What has happened?" she demanded.

Zhang Quan and another man appeared out of nowhere and before he could speak out, the handsome man beside him interjected: "It is just a small accident." He continued to face Xiang Shaolong and berated: "You are the newcomer right? Useless bum! Shouldn't you be going to your carriage now? Do you expect Head Mistress (Feng Fei) to wait for you instead?"

Hearing his sarcastic scolding, implying that Zhang Quan is incompetent, Zhang Quan's face darkened.

At this moment, Feng Fei's angelic voice sang out from beneath the veil: "Assistant Manager Sa!" Her voice carried some hints of disdain.

Having accomplished his goal, a smug Sa Li kept quiet.

Feng Fei shot a look at Xiang Shaolong and plainly ordered: "Be more careful next time. Send Fang Sheng back into the room before coming to the carriage."

Xiang Shaolong was extremely relieved that neither the Mistress nor her maid could pinpoint his real identity.

Watching her descend down the gangplank and supported by her companions, Xiang Shaolong can only force out a miserable sigh.

He can no longer slip off just like that.

Moreover, he felt an obligation to take care of Fang Sheng until he has fully recovered.

This is one of his life guiding principles.

Unknowingly, it began snowing again.

Reflected by the strong rays of the setting sun, the small flakes seemed to dance freely in the air before reluctantly landing on the ground, finishing a short but mesmerizing journey.

Time seems to have slowed down and the land purified with every layer of snow.

Xiang Shaolong directed the horses and began chauffeuring the beauty.

Four family warriors are in front paving a way for the carriage to pass through. Another eight family warriors are following the carriage.

Wei's Assistant Commanding General Ao Xiang brought a dozen of his best soldiers and they flanked the carriage on both sides, showcasing the importance of Feng Fei's stature in the eyes of all the political leaders.

She is akin to a 21st Century Superstar Celebrity with popular hit songs, unlike the typical courtesan who prostitute herself under the guise of entertainment.

Even without the burden of Fang Sheng, Xiang Shaolong will find it challenging to flee under the heavy escort.

Escape is still conceivable but it will raise Ao Xiang's suspicions.

Fortunately, Ao Xiang regarded Xiang Shaolong as Feng Fei's long serving carriage driver and did not have the slightest suspicion about him.

Meanwhile, Xiang Shaolong has no idea where he is and is blindly driving in the direction of the family warriors ahead of him.

With the hoofbeats sounding in the background, the carriage entourage eventually approached a snow-clad city without much incidents.

Most of the shops are open for business and judging from the signboards, most of the businesses are involved in carpentry, sewing, fabrics and embroidery.

Xiang Shaolong may not have any deep understanding of culture and based on his keen observation skills, he can tell that compared to all the cities he has been to, Gu City has a remarkably cultural and retro aura.

In this instant, Ao Xiang rode towards the side of the carriage and lowered his head, striking a conversation with Feng Fei: "In the past, when Jing's (annihilated state) Han Xuan Zi came to the State of Lu (annihilated state), he came across Chancellor Lu's secret literature collection. He sighed: All of Zhou's Literature is in Lu. Now that Miss (Feng Fei) is back here again, I am sure you must be feeling emotional."

Xiang Shaolong shuddered. So this was originally the State of Lu, which belongs to the State of Wei now.

Even the great Confucius was born here. It is no wonder why this State has such a strong arts culture.

Feng Fei sighed slowly and in a pained tone: "Yes. It is all because of this incident. If we, the citizens of Lu, are not overly stubborn and traditional, placing too much importance on the conservative ways, we may not be controlled first by Qi (State), then by Wu (State), followed by Yue. (Yue was eventually annihilated by Wei, explains Ji Yanran originally in Wei). Although we have the honour of being named: The Clan of Saints, we are eventually an annihilated State. General Ao is giving us too much credit."

Xiang Shaolong detected the melancholy in her voice and can feel his own emotions surging. Theoretically, Feng Fei is not a Song Princess but a Lu Princess. Nonetheless, Lu and

Song are neighbouring States and she may be connected to both States.

Ao Xiang's flattery has backfired and after a few awkward exchanges, he resumed his riding position after noticing Feng Fei's lack of interest in chatting with him.

The entourage travelled along a winding path, deviating gradually from the main road. Consequently, they were headed towards a desolate area west of the City.

Under the illumination of the lanterns, the flying snow and strong wind resembles a scene from never ending dream.

Xiang Shaolong can comprehend the agony of the beauty behind him. When Xiao Pan eventually unites the States, Ao Xiang and everybody else will become citizens of annihilated States. Such a feeling is hard to fathom.

The sunset is beautiful but it only lasts for a fleeting moment.

This can be the autobiography of the Six States right now.

The carriages drove through a sparse forest and halted near a mausoleum.

Xiang Shaolong finally realized that Feng Fei is here to pay her respects to her ancestors.

Feng Fei and everyone alighted from their carriages. Accompanied by Ao Xiang, they walked towards the mausoleum and disappeared behind the trees.

Xiang Shaolong, the family warriors and the Wei soldiers stayed with the carriages. Momentarily, sounds of crying can be heard.

Upon their return, Little Ping'er and the maids' pretty eyes were all red and swollen. The exception was Feng Fei's as she is hiding behind the veil.

It was deep into the night when everyone boarded the ship.

It was deep into the night when everyone boarded the ship.

Everyone including Gu Ming had gone into the city for a wild night of partying. Only an incensed Fang Sheng remained behind.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that his left foot is bandaged clumsily with a few pieces of cloth. He enquired: "How is it?"

Fang Sheng eyes reddened: "If not for my leg injury, I would have fought it out with them."

Xiang Shaolong has been trained in basic bone fixing skills and opened up the bandages. Feeling the leg bone structures, he heaved a sigh of relief: "It is simply a bone that has been displaced. Come! Bear with it for a while!"

Before Fang Sheng yelled out in pain and his eyes sockets are swelled up with tears, Xiang Shaolong had swiftly fixed the joint dislocation.

Fang Sheng tried taking a couple of steps and is amazed: "Brother Shen, this is miraculous!"

Xiang Shaolong patted the chair beside him and smiled: "Please sit down, I have something to tell Brother Fang."

Fang Sheng's mood has greatly improved for the better. Pleased, he sat down and invited: "Brother Shen please speak your mind!"

Xiang Shaolong extracted the two gold ingots from his bosom. Placing them on his open palm, he presented them before Fang Sheng's eyes.

Fang Sheng's eyes grew as big as saucers. He let out a loud gasp: "Heavens! This is pure gold."

Two simple gold ingots are more than sufficient for an ordinary man to live without worries for the rest of his life.

Xiang Shaolong pressed the gold ingots into his hands and whispered: "They are yours now."

Fang Sheng hesitated for a while and shook his head: "How can I take Brother Shen's gold?"

Xiang Shaolong lied: "I have several more pieces of gold. They are bestowed to me when Prince Wuji knows that he will be sentenced to death soon. Brother Fang, please accept them and use the excuse of your broken leg to leave this malicious place, fulfilling your dream."

Holding the gold ingots tightly in his hands, Fang Sheng is curious: "Brother Shen is not lacking in wealth, why did you choose to lead the life of a carriage driver?"

Xiang Shaolong continued his bluff: "Honestly speaking, I am making use of this job to leave Daliang (Wei capital). Ever since the death of Prince Wuji, no one dares to employ his ex family warriors like us. I am not going to live my life without making my mark somewhere. I am therefore heading to Qi to try my luck."

Fang Sheng is so touched he began to tear again: "I am beyond gratitude. With this two pieces of gold and my savings over the past two years, I can finally resign from Miss (Feng Fei) tomorrow."

After some thought, he added: "Why don't we leave together? Sa Li is awfully narrow-minded and he will never let you off. Zhang Quan is only making use of you; even if you died fighting for him, he will not even feel the least bit of sadness."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "After Brother Fang is gone, I will have no more reservations. Our fall will not be in vain."

Fang Sheng fell into a daze. In this instant, he felt like Xiang Shaolong is much more than who he truly is.

Fang Sheng could not hold back his plans and right that evening, he approached Zhang Quan, asking to leave the troupe because of his leg injury.

Zhang Quan showed no signs of asking him to stay on. On the pretext that he is resigning instead of troupe disbandment, he paid Fang Sheng a few miserable bronze coins and commanded him to leave the ship early next morning.

An upset Fang Sheng confided in Xiang Shaolong about this issue. Originally, he can still be entitled to a generous dismissal fee for his years with the troupe. Needless to say, Zhang Quan has pocketed most of it. Ultimately, he is not overly concerned about this discrepancy because the two gold ingots are enough to satisfy all his needs.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong sent Fang Sheng off the ship. While he was hesitating to leave with him, Gu Ming and his gang happened to return to the ship. Mocking them again for their incompetence, Gu Ming and his gang boarded the ship.

With Wei soldiers swarming all over the pier and Zhang Quan staring at them from the ship, Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to retaliate. He calmly bade farewell to Fang Sheng and returned to the ship.

The ships began sailing.

Xiang Shaolong can sense his fellow workers and drivers are shying from him as if he is carry a contagious disease. No one wants to converse with him and even Zhang Quan's followers are treating him like trash. He was greatly humoured. Obtaining his breakfast, he hid in a corner of the ship's stern and began eating.

Inside his mind, he was churning ideas on how to create a big hoo ha, forcing Feng Fei to dismiss him. He can then swagger off to freedom without raising any suspicions.

However, timing is critical to his plans. Ideally, it should happen before the next stop when the ships dock to

replenish their food and water supplies. He can then leave the ship both mentally and physically.

In the beginning, Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty over snatching the original Shen Liang's employment. Now, he felt that he was helping him to avoid a calamity instead.

Gu Ming and his collaborators are likely to have been ordered by Sa Li to get rid of himself at all costs.

That Sa Li is rather good looking and could be using this natural advantage to start a relationship with one of the more influential serving maids. With his increase in influence, he could be conspiring to take over Zhang Quan's job.

Lost in his thoughts, a small pair of shoes suddenly appeared before his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong looked up in panic but his view is blocked by two huge and jutting breasts. In that second, he still has no idea who is this person in front of him. Taken aback, he got on his feet and found out the lady is actually Sister Ling, the attractive serving maid of Second Mistress Dong Shuzhen.

Stifling her laughter and after glancing twice at him, Sister Ling coldly hissed: "Are you the trouble maker Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong has already made up his mind to leave the ship and doesn't bother to give her any leeway. Assuming a domineering stance, he joked back: "Sister Ling gives me too much credit. Without any supporters, how much trouble can I create?"

Never in her wildest dreams would Sister Ling expect Xiang Shaolong to be so rebellious and talked back to her. Her expression changed colour instantaneously and she scolded: "How dare you! Do you know who you are speaking to?!"

Folding his arms across his chest, Xiang Shaolong uttered to nobody in particular: "Every nation has its laws. Every household has its rules. However, some principles are ever encompassing. I am a lone ranger whereas other people are forming cliques and gangs. Sister Ling, why don't you judge from your own conscience: Who has the potential to be the trouble maker around here?"

Sister Ling is dumbfounded. During a debate, she is light years away from Xiang Shaolong who is used to complex court arguments. Her face turned red in anger, she stared at him for a before her arms went into akimbo position. She screeched: "Are you tired of your job?"

Xiang Shaolong leisurely responded: "Isn't this up to Manager Zhang or Miss Feng?"

Sister Ling is often the one doing the scolding. Now that she has been put down badly by a lowly driver like Xiang Shaolong, she is as mad as a bull and stomped off.

Xiang Shaolong watched as she stomped over to the other side where Gu Ming and his guys were and summoned Gu Mong into the ship's cabin. Acknowledging that a good show is about to start, Xiang Shaolong smiled to himself. He turned to view the beautiful snow scenery on the both sides of the shore.

He is certain that Sa Li has hooked up with the alluring serving maid Sister Ling. He may even enjoy the support of the Second-in-Command Dong Shuzen to openly challenge Zhang Quan's authority.

Just as he was pondering which route to travel back to Qin, someone tapped his shoulder.

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and a family warrior entered his view. He is one of those who participated in escorting Feng Fei last night for her prayers.

The family warrior commanded: "Master Zhang wants to see you!"

Xiang Shaolong noticed that the family warrior dared not look at him straight into his eyes while talking. Easily predicting the situation, he smiled back: "May I know how do I address Brother?"

The man answered: "I am Xu Ran. Come with me!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his adrenaline rushing and his limbs itching for some action. He followed Xu Ran into the cabins.

CHAPTER 10

A Shattered Dream

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

FOLLOWING Xu Ran, Xiang Shaolong stepped into the cabins and came to a door.

Xu Ran stopped in his tracks and pushed the door inwards. He gestured: "Master Zhang is inside, you can go in on your own!"

Surprisingly, there was no ambush along the corridors. Instead, melodious music can be heard from the upper decks. This is a brilliant situation to trap Xiang Shaolong. Even if he shouted for help, no one can hear him.

Xiang Shaolong grinned and viciously used his own shoulder to smash into Xu Ran's shoulder.

Caught unaware, Xu Ran called out in shock and stumbled into the cabin.

A black cloth bag swiftly clamped down and enveloped Xu Ran's head and face. The bag was secured and Xu Ran was dragged deeper into the cabin. Gu Ming, Fu Yan, a few other drivers, Wu Xun and a few family warriors pounced upon Xu Ran, raining merciless, heavy blows on him.

Xiang Shaolong slipped into the cabin and closed the door behind him. Xu Ran is already pitifully writhing on the floor like a freshly cooked shrimp.

These men may be overly excited to carry out their task and did not notice that they were beating the wrong person. Xiang Shaolong and Xu Ran are dressed very differently and have different body builds as well.

Gu Ming was the first to notice that the man standing at the cabin door is Xiang Shaolong and not Xu Ran. Flabbergasted, he pointed dumbly at Xiang Shaolong but no words can come out from his mouth.

By now, everyone realized they have laid their hands on the wrong person.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head slowly and sighed: "Do you know what is your mistake??"

Xiang Shaolong dashed forward and came to the side of the short strongman, Wu Xun, in a flash. Using his momentum, he kneeled Wu Xun in his nether regions.

Back in the 21st century, Xiang Shaolong is an expert when it comes to bar fights. He totally understood the principle: To capture a man, shoot his horse; to nab the thieves, capture the bandit king.

Wu Xun is a strong, well-built and courageous man. Otherwise, he would not possess the strength to push Xiang Shaolong down the gangplank. Therefore, Xiang Shaolong chose to attack him first and attacked his most vulnerable spot as well.

His speed is too incredible and Wu Xun did not have the slightest chance to defend himself.

The next moment, Xiang Shaolong has already slipped in between the two family warriors. Using his two elbows, he strike both men heavily at the side of the rib cages.

These close combat techniques are most applicable while fighting in tight and narrow spaces. It is hard for the opponents to predict his moves and he can easily use the opponents' bodies to shield himself.

Both family warriors cried out in pain and collapsed.

By now, Xiang Shaolong has leapt to the front of Fu Yan. Avoiding a punch to his face, he grabbed Fu Yan's neck with both hands and kneeled him twice below his abdomen.

With another flying kick, he sent another driver soaring through the air. PIAK! The driver hit the ship's wall.

From the upper decks, the music became more lively and high pitched, as if it is cheering Xiang Shaolong.

Out of a sudden, someone grabbed Xiang Shaolong from behind. Releasing Fu Yan and letting him kneel down to the ground, Xiang Shaolong used Judo and flipped the man behind him over his own head, aiming to slam him in the direction of the cabin window.

BANG! The man's spine hit the cabin window frame and the man rolled to the corner of the ship's wall.

Gu Ming and the other two drivers advanced towards Xiang Shaolong. Using hand-grabbing techniques, Xiang Shaolong had a grip on one of the driver's wrist and kicked him twice in his abdomen. The driver bent over in pain.

Tugging the driver with his enormous strength, he managed to cause the stumbling man to crash head on with the other driver. Both drivers collapsed into a tangled heap.

Gu Ming is now facing Xiang Shaolong alone. The two family warriors had managed to get on their feet but were still in a daze.

Gu Ming is mad with fury and anger is glimmering in his eyes. He drew out a dagger from his bosom and launched a piercing attack towards Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong faked a movement and avoided the thrust. Using his hand in a chopping attack, he ruthlessly strikes down on his wrist.

Gu Ming's dagger fell to the ground and he stumbled forward. Xiang Shaolong delivered a crushing punch to his back as he fell.

This overbearing driver landed flat on his face and is a pathetic sight to behold.

JIANG! JIANG! The two family warriors have regained their composure and their aggressive spirits have been ignited. Both drew out their swords.

Bloodwave left its sheath as well and turned into a sword storm.

Never in their wildest imagination did they expect Xiang Shaolong to be a godly swordsman. Among cries of panic, their long swords have long left their grasps and their wrists are bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong sheathed his sword and pressed forward, attacking with his iron fists.

Sounds of bones breaking and chilling screams followed. Three punches later, both men can no longer stand up.

As Gu Ming struggled to get up, Xiang Shaolong pressed him against the ship's wall and landed four heavy blows to his abdomen. Gu Ming vomited a mouthful of fresh blood and sat down with his back against the ship's wall. His pain is indescribable.

The cabin door swung open and was continued by Sister Ling's shriek.

Except for Xiang Shaolong, nobody else is able to stand up.

Xiang Shaolong casually clapped his hands and joked: "How are you, Sister Ling? Aren't you going to report me and get me fired?"

Sister Ling's exquisite face has long been drained of any colour and she is still unable to believe her own eyes. Her lips were shuddering and she is speechless at the same time.

One of the family warriors managed to get on his knees but after puking a mouthful of blood, he fainted back onto the ground.

With his piercing eyes shining a deathly aura, Xiang Shaolong advanced towards Sister Ling.

Sister Ling screamed and fled the scene.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his limbs and believed that it is time for him to leave this ship soon.

Xiang Shaolong is standing confidently in the centre of the spacious main hall of the ship.

Feng Fei is wearing her usual veil. Behind her stood Little Ping'er who is still dressed up as a boy.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong laid his eyes on the second in command of the Song and Dance Troupe, Dong Shuzen. She is sitting beside Feng Fei and standing besides her is Sister Ling, who is still quivering with fear.

Dong Shuzen is around her twenties and extraordinary features lined her face. Her eyes sparkle like Christmas ornaments and are incredibly lively, betraying her intelligence.

The Head Musician Yun Niang is present too. She is seated on the other side of Feng Fei. Presently in her middle age, she still retains much of her beauty and portrays a sense of maturity that is lacking in all the young lasses. She is as mesmerizing and alluring as the courtesans.

Zhang Quan is seated on the side with a joyful expression.

Sa Li has been summoned from the other ship to participate in this 'court session.' He is seated opposite Zhang Quan and his eyes are filled with hatred. He looked as if he wants to swallow Xiang Shaolong whole.

The two men and three ladies are seated like a fan, converging on the standing Xiang Shaolong.

Kun Shan and the other family warriors lined up two sides of the hall and the entrance of the hall. Although there are more than twenty people of them in the room, there was complete silence, adding to the stifling atmosphere.

Gu Ming, Fu Yan, Wu Xun, Xu Ran and the others have been properly bandaged. Weak and dejectedly looking, they sat on one side of the hall like a bunch of defeated cocks (from a cockfight). They look amusing and yet pitiful at the same time.

Dong Shuzen started: "Shen Liang, what is going on? Since you joined our troupe, there have been numerous incidents. Are you aware that our troupe forbids dueling?"

Her voice is sharp, clear and full of energy. Her singing should be delightful to the ears.

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze over the entire crowd and found everyone has their eyes on him. Only Feng Fei remains unfathomable. He grinned widely and deepened his voice, replying: "If you wish to know what has happened, why don't you ask Sister Ling instead? She is the mastermind and should know much more than me."

Sa Li interrupted furiously: "Shen Liang, who do you think you are? How dare you be so disrespectful! Kneel!"

Xiang Shaolong's eyes lit up with iciness. He stared incessantly at Sa Li but maintained his silence.

The family warriors supporting Sa Li began to turn boisterous and unruly.

Feng Fei scolded: "Shut up!" Everyone quietened down.

Pressing his hand on his sword hilt, Xiang Shaolong raised his head and laughed: "I'd rather be killed than to be insulted. A man's kneel is as valuable as gold. If you want me to kneel to crooks like Sa Li, you might as well take my life first."

Sa Li stood up immediately and grabbed his sword handle. He grunted: "Then let me take your lowly life."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused: "If you can withstand ten strikes from me, I will kow tow ten times to you."

Sa Li is angry beyond comprehension. His face turned from red to white and red again. However, he dare not draw his sword.

Adding fuel to fire, Zhang Quan egged: "If Assistant Manager Sa possess excellent sword skills, I, Zhang Quan, will like to witness it."

Yun Niang who has been silent all this while sighed: "You are all noisy and unruly. What is this troupe coming to? How can you solve any issues arguing like this?"

Sa Li took the opportunity to stand down. Boiling with rage, he returned to his seat.

Feng Fei softly decided: "Very good. Now let us understand the whole situation first. Wu Xun, you are the head of the family warriors. Tell me what is going on."

Wu Xun is a simple-minded person and is not good with words. He could not find the words to express himself and his face is beginning to turn red.

Gu Ming intervened: "This matter is started by Shen Liang. We brothers are just enjoying ourselves in the cabin when Shen Liang..."

Little Ping'er called out in interruption: "Miss (Feng Fei) is asking Wu Xun, who are you to speak up?"

A grievous Gu Ming swallowed the rest of his words.

Wu Xun finally found his tongue and replied in an anxious tone: "Yes. Shen Liang barged into our cabin and began beating us up with no rhyme or reason. That is all."

Zhang Quan dismissed: "How would he know that all of you are hiding in the cabin and enjoying yourself?"

Wu Xun is speechless once again.

Sa Li frantically countered: "Is General Manager trying to protect this criminal? It is obviously Shen Liang is the one attacking and injuring all these men. Looking at his disrespectful bearing, you should know he is the reckless perpetrator."

Dong Shuzen began to assess Xiang Shaolong. She frowned: "Everyone keep quiet for now."

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, she questioned: "Shen Liang, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Xiang Shaolong will definitely not offer an explanation. He behaved like he cannot be bothered and shrugged his shoulders: "I have nothing to add. Second Mistress just have to say it and I will leave the troupe, concluding this matter."

Zhang Quan's face changed colour: "How can you leave without explaining yourself?"

Xiang Shaolong shot him a cold glare and snorted: "Master Zhang is having ulterior motives in hiring me. Now that I have understood your malicious intentions, I will never allow myself to be used by you. What is the point of staying here?"

Zhang Quan is considerably infuriated that even the green veins on his forehead are protruding. In that moment, his guilty conscience held his tongue.

Sister Ling frostily reprimanded: "You insolent slave, you have injured so many men and there is no way we will let you leave like that!"

Dong Shuzhen cut her sentence: "Little Ling zip it!"

Sister Ling has always enjoyed Dong Shuzhen's affections and is seldom publicly admonished like the present situation. She began to tremble with fear and dared not speak anymore.

Xiang Shaolong is initially humoured and nonchalant, awaiting the decision to chase him out of the Song and Dance Troupe.

He purposely pushed the decision into Dong Shuzhen's authority because he assumed she would shield her own personal serving maid. When he heard her telling off Sister Ling, he began to worry.

The ship's main hall is filled with total quietness except for Zhang Quan and Sa Li's heavy breathing.

Dong Shuzhen firstly looked at the amazing soundless Feng Fei and skimmed everyone in the room. Finally laying her eyes on Xiang Shaolong once again, she frowned slightly and lectured: "It is no longer the issue of the fighting but Shen Liang's bad attitude and lack of respect for others."

Pausing a while, she continued: "You are an extraordinary man but we are just a simple Song and Dance troupe, I am

afraid we cannot accommodate your talents here, therefore...”

Xiang Shaolong is about to send his thankful prayers to heaven when Feng Fei suddenly spoke up: “Hold it!”

Everybody turned their attention to her in awe.

Xiang Shaolong’s mind became agitated. If Feng Fei identified him, his life will turn into hell.

He deliberately changed his voice, posture and with his new appearance, on top of their one and only meeting, by right he should be able to evade her detection.

Under the scrutiny of every eye in the hall, Feng Fei softly sighed: “Who can imagine that there will be so many issues even in a small troupe such as ours. The fault does not lie with Shen Liang but with the management. I have been very tolerant so far but things are really getting out of hand. I will not longer sit back and do nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong was consoled that his cover is not blown. Concurrently, he knows that things are not going according to his plans. If he is not dismissed, is he going to Qi instead? Zhang Quan, Sa Li and Sister Ling’s face lost colour upon hearing her words.

Dong Shuzen is feeling uneasy too. She can feel Feng Fei’s words are aimed at her as well.

Feng Fei judged: “Shen Liang, you can continue to be my driver with a peace of mind. If anyone were to make trouble for you, you can report to me directly.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned beyond words. He wished he could start crying at the failure of his escape plan.

If he insisted on leaving, doubts will be raised.

Zhang Quan who mistook him for the real Shen Liang now hates him to the core. He may even plot against himself or have misgivings about his identity.

He can only salute and give his thanks.

Feng Fei is now facing Zhang Quan and Sa Li. She gracefully took down her veil, revealed crystal sharp features that can rival Ji Yanran and Qin Qing.

However, her two eyes are frosty and her expression is one of displeasure.

Zhang Quan was terrified and he hastily kneeled down, kowtowing: "I know I am wrong. I know I am wrong!"

Sa Li is still banking on Dong Shuzen's influence and tried to wriggle his way out. He argued: "Mistress, I wasn't on this ship when the incident happened..."

Sister Ling shrieked: "How dare you talk back like this?"

An annoyed Dong Shuzen commanded: "Little Ling kneel! From today onwards, you need not serve me anymore!"

Sister Ling petite frame was shaking uncontrollably. She broke down crying.

Sa Li finally came to his senses and kneeled down too, kowtowing non-stop.

Feng Fei plainly state: "At the next stop, Sa Li you better scram. Go as far as your legs can take you. Otherwise, don't blame me for being heartless."

Turning to Zhang Quan, she announced: "Taking into consideration all the years you have been with me, and taking into account you realized your mistake, I will only demote you to Assistant Manager. Yu Niang will now control all the finances. Gu Ming and his partners in crime will all be fined a month's salary. Anyone who opposes will be fired on the spot."

Finishing, she ignored Sa Li's pleas and rose, leaving the hall. Even Dong Shuzen was horrified and kneeling on the ground.

Xiang Shaolong has no choice but to kneel down as well. In his mind, he was contemplating to join Sa Li in 'going as far as his legs can take him'.

Feng Fei's astute judgment and insight is something he definitely did not anticipate.

CHAPTER 11

River Prisoner

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER the episode, Xiang Shaolong's status is largely elevated. For a start, he gets to upgrade from his basement bunk to a room in the middle deck. He is now roommates with four other family warriors and no longer face the likes of Gu Ming and the other drivers.

Most importantly, nobody dares to pick on him anymore or even be rude to him verbally. Of course this is not solely based on Feng Fei's warning; it is also due to his assault on Wu Xun and Company.

To a certain extent, he has rose to become the hero of the troupe. Many other colleagues who have been oppressed by Zhang Quan, Sa Li and Sister Ling in the past are now delighted to have Xiang Shaolong vent their frustration.

In the power struggle within the troupe, he is no longer a newcomer but a veteran, a winner. But according to his escape plans, he is the biggest loser.

He is naturally unwilling to be sent to Qi in such a manner but it is suicide to jump into the river and swim away in the middle of winter.

It is still a question if he can successfully slip away at the next landing.

At dinnertime, there is still no one who is courageous enough to strike a conversation with him. Nonetheless, people are beginning to nod their head to acknowledge him and their body language is friendlier.

Xiang Shaolong relished his peace.

When most of the troupe staff have retreated back into their rooms to avoid the cold winter wind, he sat alone on a pile of goods at the ship's tail. He stared blankly at the gorgeous scenery on the two riverbanks under the starry sky.

Three other big ships are following closely behind.

Remembering his lovely wives and son in Xianyang, now further and further away from him, and recalling Zhou Liang and the Eagle King's tragic death, as well as his soldiers dying

one by one beside him, his chest swelled up with intense emotions and he nearly wanted to shout his lungs out.

Li Mu taught him the bitterness of defeat in war.

But he does not hate him, nor bear thoughts of revenge.

Li Mu did mentioned: "If we ever meet on the battlefield, there will be no mercy." Li Mu's words felt fresh in his mind, as if it was only spoken to him yesterday.

Now that he is unaccounted for, will Xiao Pan be miserable or secretly celebrating? At the end of the day, Xiang Shaolong represents Xiao Pan's past.

Without Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can be the Great Qin Shihuang without any reservations.

Xiang Shaolong is having conflicting thoughts.

Xiao Pan is changing every day.

In the history of China, every warrior who assisted his Lord significantly never enjoys a good ending, unless he betrayed his Lord to be King.

Therefore, he exercised utmost caution in this aspect. He seldom claimed credit for his achievements but he somehow became a centre of power regardless and exerts notable influence over this future Qin Shihuang.

He knew Xiao Pan since his teens; will he be able to avoid this unfortunate tradition? Deep in his contemplations, a gentle female voice sounded beside his ear: "A penny for your thoughts?" Xiang Shaolong broke out of his stupor and

turned his head around. It is the recently promoted, Lead Musician Yu Niang.

He hurriedly got up and paid his respects.

Yu Niang stepped to his side, shoulder-to-shoulder and sighed: "Are you enjoying the scenery here in loneliness because everyone else on this ship is terrified of you? First Mistress (Feng Fei) and I saw you from the upper decks and it is she who asked me to speak to you."

Xiang Shaolong observed at her carefully. This lady should be twenty-seven or twenty eight years old. She maintained her beauty well and her silky skin is comparable to a much younger girl. Her well-defined features are peppered with small signs of aging but she has a more womanly feel. He was mesmerized momentarily.

Yun Niang saw him staring at herself and smiled: "Looking at how intoxicated you are earlier, I am sure you enjoy countless days of glory serving Prince Xinling. Out of his three thousand family warriors, being his personal driver is an accomplishment already. Now, no one will belittle you."

Xiang Shaolong recollected the gratitude and enmity between him and Prince Xinling, his bright eyes revealing signs of melancholy. The usually calm and composed Yun Niang was struck by his expression and her heart is beginning to stir. She can feel herself becoming more and more attracted to this man.

Xiang Shaolong caught Yun Niang averting his own gaze and thought to himself: Even she is afraid of me? He sighed: "To

be loved everywhere you go or to be feared everywhere you go, which is a better choice?"

Yun Niang discovered she cannot relate to Xiang Shaolong as a plain subordinate anymore and his words have aroused her interests. Pushing back her delicate hair which as been blown out of place by the wind, she replied without thinking: "Needless to say, it is better to be loved." Her face reddened when she finished speaking.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "This is the mindset of the young and inexperienced. It will be great to have both but that is impossible. I will choose to be feared; at least that keeps me safe."

Yun Niang was stunned at his words. A long while later, she confessed: "You thinking is indeed unique but not without reason. Many who have hurt me in the past are people who loved me. Ai. For your level of talent, why are you contented to be a simple driver?" Even she herself could not comprehend why is she discussing intimate matters with a subordinate.

Xiang Shaolong of course do not suffer from any inferiority complex. To a modern man from the 21st Century, every human being is equal.

In reply to her question, Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Luck comes in cycles."

Yun Niang will never fully understand his true intentions but after spending some time to grasp the meaning of his words,

she was moved: "What an excellent way to describe the factor of luck in our human lives!"

Reluctantly, she bade: "I have to go and report to Miss."

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to enquire: "Are we docking soon?"

Yun Niang responded: "Are you thinking of heading to shore to entertain yourself? Not on this stop. We will reach Li Xia tomorrow but will only dock for two hours. Except for those purchasing supplies, nobody else is permitted to leave the ship. I have to go!"

Watching her sashay away, Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. Looks like he has to postpone his escape to the stop after the next.

As expected, the ship docked the next day. From the deck, Xiang Shaolong can see the pier swarming with Qi citizens, from commoners to officials. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of Feng Fei and even the City Mayor personally came on board to pay his respects to Feng Fei, giving Xiang Shaolong zilch chances of slipping away.

He is beginning to grow impatient. This ship resembles an open concept water borne prison to him.

The sole consolation is that throughout these days on board, he has fully recovered from all his ordeals. He looks much better than he was when he was still a fugitive. His skin is no longer coarse and yellow and he is not longer all skin and bones.

On the way back to his room, he bumped into Zhang Quan. He gave Zhang Quan a venomous look but Zhang Quan only smiled in return.

He is now quite friendly with the four family warriors and he tried to ask more about the next pier stop.

One of them named Fei Sun laughed: "Brother Shen must thinking about girls."

CHAPTER 12

Meeting a Friend in Foreign Land

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE NEXT MORNING, Feng Fei assembled everyone from the Song & Dance Troupe, including the courtesans and management staff like Zhang Quan, announcing that she is making an exception and promoting Xiang Shaolong to be the General Manager, and is charged with all matters pertaining to the troupe.

Dong Shuzen and Zhang Quan were astounded but dared not oppose.

The first to congratulate him is Yun Liang, who also whispered into his ear: "You should thank me for your promotion."

She wants Xiang Shaolong to know that she is Feng Fei's confidante and is the one secretly encouraging Feng Fei to promote him. Xiang Shaolong doesn't know whether to laugh or cry instead.

This is also the first time he set his eyes on the other eleven courtesans besides Dong Shuzen. Each and every one of them is a peerless, fascinating beauty, causing him to lose his bearings.

However, most of them are nonchalant about Feng Fei's promoting Xiang Shaolong and their expressions remained unfazed.

One of the leggy courtesans Zhu Xiuzhen even looked at him with disdain.

There are a total of one hundred and eighty troupe staff.

Feng Fei is at the top of the hierarchy.

Below her would be the courtesans and musicians, headed by Dong Shuzen and Yun Niang respectively. A staff of serving maids attends to them.

Except for a few men who are musicians, the entire group is made up of females.

The management of the troupe, both internally and externally falls on the shoulders of himself and his assistant

Zhang Quan. Family warriors, drivers, male servants and porters all fall within their jurisdiction, forming a government-like organization.

Zhang Quan's supporter Kun Shan leads the family warriors while the drivers are led by Gu Ming.

These two men, in addition to the grudge-bearing Zhang Quan, are enough to give Xiang Shaolong a really big headache.

He could not wait to make his escape this instance, but burdened with this heavy responsibility and Feng Fei's high expectations, he could neither advance nor retreat, and nearly wanted to cry his heart out.

Something good that comes out of it is that Zhang Quan is now deployed to the other ship and Xiang Shaolong has a single cabin all to himself on the second deck. When Yun Niang came a knocking, he is mentally prepared to receive certain benefits from her, at a cost.

On the pretext of handing over work to him, Yun Niang entered his room and there is no way Xiang Shaolong can reject her.

After handing over her work to him, a courageous Yun Niang enticingly look straight into his eyes and cooed: "All right, how is Manager Shen going to thank me now?"

Her expression reminds him of Zhu Ji (Qin) and Madam Zhuang (Chu).

For (sexually) experienced and mature women like them, when they take an interest in someone, sex is all that they will pursue and they are very open and direct about it. On one hand is to satisfy a human need, on the other hand, they are more senior and cannot be bothered with the wild fantasies and cumbersome dating process of the young men and young women. They will take the most practical route to satisfy their needs.

From a men's point of view, Xiang Shaolong will not mind having a friendly match with this sexy lady and is confident of giving her a session she will never forget and wonderful memories to last her lifetime.

Nevertheless, in the present situation and while he is planning to flee, it is not wise to get involved in a relationship.

He knows himself best. When he has made love to a woman, he will certainly be emotionally attached to her. This burden is something he can do without for now.

If he just did her and left, he will absolutely feel guilty about it in the future.

Unless of course, if she is in the flesh trade. That will be a different case altogether.

He found it difficult to reject her on the spot and used a delaying tactic instead. Suppressing his own manly reactions to her advances, he changed the topic and smiled: "I am obviously grateful to you, but I have a question that I hope you can enlighten me!"

Pleased, Yun Niang prompted: "Please go ahead and ask. I will tell you everything I know."

Judging from her body language and tone, it is evident that Xiang Shaolong can do whatever he wants with her. Xiang Shaolong can feel his loins stirring and was about to lose control. Warning himself to behave, he asked in an official manner: "Wherever the Song & Dance Troupe travels to, we will attract all the lustful men. For Miss Feng it is definitely not an issue but when someone wants to woo our courtesans, what should I do?"

Yun Niang gave him a meaningful look and answered: "The scenario you articulated happens rather often but our Courtesans are not prostitutes. If any man wishes to gain her heart, he will have to put in considerable effort. For example, inviting them to banquets, using ways and means to make them happy, and try to see if they will reciprocate. These kinds of arrangements are beyond Mistress's control and unquestionably beyond your league."

Xiang Shaolong is curious: "So are there any courtesans who got married and left the troupe?"

Yun Niang nodded: "Yes there are, but the numbers are limited. What is so good about marrying the rich and powerful? Before they bed you, you are treated like a queen; after they laid you, your value is gone. In addition, you have to become enemies with the other wives and concubines that they married. Staying as a courtesan is much more comfortable. When you have made your fortune and

returned to your village in glory, you can marry whoever your heart fancies.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement: “Marrying a rich man is like falling into the sea. For a girl to have such insight is truly brilliant.”

Yun Niang’s eyes lit up. She praised: “Marrying a rich man is like falling into the sea; what an excellent expression! I must tell Mistress about it. She is writing a song about a pitiful wife. This line can be one of the lyrics.”

Xiang Shaolong can only smile bitterly to himself.

Yun Niang became more aroused and moved closer to Xiang Shaolong, where her long dress is touching his kneecap. She divulged: “On this trip to Lin Zi, we are also participating in a competition with two other famous Courtesans, which explains why Mistress is very anxious. She will not want to lose to Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang at Henggong Pavilion and Qixia School respectively.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong know that these two other ladies whom he has encountered before are going to Lin Zi as well.

Qixia School is naturally the headquarters of Qixia Sword Saint, Mister You a.k.a. Cao Quidao. Not recognizing Henggong Pavilion, Xiang Shaolong sought the answer from Yun Niang.

Yun Niang sweetly replied: “Henggong Pavilion, also known as Huan Pavilion, is a grand conference hall in the Qi Palace.

When Henggong is in power, he loved to hold lavish banquets there, hosting his officials as well as visiting diplomats. Hence, it became the name of the Pavilion. Courtesans who have never performed at Henggong Pavilion before are not considered prestigious.”

Hearing her explanation, Xiang Shaolong is filled with a yearning to take pay a visit to the place. In this period of the Warring States, Qi is considered one of the bigger states with rich cultures and tradition. Since he is passing by, it will be a pity to give it a miss. However, preserving his own life is more critical. He lost the mood to tour the place and reminded himself to stop thinking about it.

Yun Niang leaned onto him and gently commented: “The King of Qi is rather generous, paying us 200 gold ingots for two shows. When we arrive, you must remember to collect this payment from him.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. It is an astronomical amount in these ancient times. He realized the people of Qi are squandering away their nation’s wealth. The same amount of money can pay for a year’s wages for five hundred soldiers.

Yun Niang coaxed: “I have told you everything; you have yet to tell me how are you going to show your thanks.”

Since there is no way he can avoid the situation, Xiang Shaolong decided to cast aside all his reservations. Snaking his hand to hug her thin waist, he was about to pull her into

an embrace when the ship suddenly braked to a stop. Moments later, it began sailing at a much slower pace.

Both of them are startled. They will only reach Lin Zi tomorrow. Why did the ship suddenly stop? Ahead of them, shining lanterns can be seen.

Using this distraction, Xiang Shaolong jumped up and went to his window, looking out. It appears that there is a huge ship ahead of them and is intentionally slowing down for their ships to catch up.

By now, Yun Niang has squeezed to his side, her petite frame prostrated on his body, trying to catch a glimpse.

Xiang Shaolong mused: "I wonder who is the owner of that ship?"

Yun Niang scrutinized the flags hoisted at the tail of the new ship. She abruptly shrieked: "Mister Tan is here! He is on board the ship of the Imperial Physician of Han."

From her exhilarated and glowing expression, Xiang Shaolong believed that this Mister Tan has an unusual relationship with Yun Niang.

Men are really assholes. He initially regarded Yun Niang's passion as his misfortune and treated her as a platonic friend. Seeing her excited and horny as a bitch in heat, he knew that his 'love rival' has appeared, evoking pangs of jealousy. With a sour taste in his mouth, he inquired: "Who is Mister Tan?"

An elated Yun Niang has forgotten all about her plans to seduce Xiang Shaolong. She merrily chirped: "Among the gifted men within Lord Nanliang's Residence, Mister Tan is the most talented man in terms of poetry and music. He is a trusted confidante of Lord Nanliang as well. He did mention coming to see our performance at Lin Zi and here he is! I must tell Sister Feng (Fei)!" Finishing her sentence, she exited his room in a flash, ignoring Xiang Shaolong completely.

Xiang Shaolong can only look on as the door slammed in his face with a 'bang!' In the same instance, he could feel something weird rousing in his mind.

Lord Nanliang's name rang a bell, but whom did he hear it from?

The gap between the two ships is slowly closing.

Feng Fei and her fellow courtesans are all gathered on the deck, enthusiastically awaiting the arrival of Mister Tan. It appears that this poetry and music prodigy holds an important place in their hearts.

Yun Niang is the most fanatical of them all, waving her hands harder than all the courtesans.

Illuminated by the moon and lanterns, several men can be seen on the facing side of the new ship. They are waving energetically in response and the atmosphere is remarkably lively.

Ropes with grappling hooks are tossed over from the other ship. Xiang Shaolong hastily directed the family warriors to hang on to the ropes, pulling the ships even closer together.

The ships slowed down to a snail's pace.

When the ships come close enough for him to look at the faces of the other party, Xiang Shaolong's body shook uncontrollably. He has just seen a friend that he has missed for many years.

When the friend happened to lay his eyes on Xiang Shaolong, he was stunned as well, and his body shook uncontrollably in response.

This friend is none other than Xiao Yuetan.

Xiang Shaolong finally solved the mystery. It was Tu Xian who told him about Lord Nanliang.

Upon reaching Han (State), Xiao Yuetan became Lord Nanliang's family warrior. With his many hidden talents, it is no surprise that he managed to gain the affections of the courtesans.

LONG! The two ships lightly collided and after a series of tremors, are finally lined up side by side.

A gangplank came over from the new ship and lodged onto their ship. Xiao Yuetan was the first up the gangplank and strode over with a few of his followers. He first winked at Xiang Shaolong before laughing happily, coming to Feng Fei. He paid his respects to her, praising: "Since we parted last Spring, it has been a year since we last met. Miss Feng's

spellbinding song and dance performance still occupies my thoughts and dreams. To think I can have the fortune to meet you tonight on this river. The Heavens have been really kind to me.”

Leading the courtesans in returning the courtesies, Feng Fei smiled: “The meeting in Han was a most memorable event for me as well. A stimulating conversation that went on till nighttime has benefitted me tremendously. Since we are lucky enough to run into Mister tonight, we must be a good host and treat Mister Tan and our other guests to a cup of tea in our ship hall.”

Xiao Yuetan signaled to his men on his ship to retrieve the ropes and gangplank before leading his followers, together with Feng Fei, into the ship hall.

Xiang Shaolong is craving for a good talk with Xiao Yuetan but he can only suppress this desire for the time being. He felt relieved as well. Witnessing Xiao Yuetan’s authority and achievements, he is certain that Xiao Yuetan is doing very well under Lord Nanliang. Otherwise, he would not be able to commandeer a ship to fulfill his date (with Feng Fei), coming all the way to Lin Zi to watch The Three Courtesans Grand Competition.

All the jealousy in his heart has effortlessly vanished and he wondered how many other courtesans has his playboy friend tried aside from Yun Niang. When the two ships are separated, Xiang Shaolong went to the ship’s hall, wanting to check out Xiao Yuetan’s situation.

At the entrance of the ship's hall, he can see Xiao Yuetan introducing his three followers to Feng Fei. They are all important men working for Lord Nanliang. From their appearances, Xiang Shaolong can tell that they are very knowledgeable.

Feng Fei, Yun Niang and the courtesans are seated on the left while Xiao Yuetan and his men are seated on the right. Yun Niang went to the extent of personally serving tea to the four men and never stopped batting her eyelashes at Xiao Yuetan.

Xiao Yuetan saw him at the door but pretended to ignore him.

Xiang Shaolong was aware that his status is below that of the people in the hall and was contemplating to enter or leave when a maid standing behind Zhu Xiuzhen (courtesan) came over, disparaging him: "This place is none of your concern, please attend to your other matters instead!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his blood boiling. He cast his view to Zhu Xiuzhen, who did not even care to return his gaze. Contempt, however, is written all over her face. Enraged, he softly grunted to the maid: "Scram!" The maid panicked and upon seeing the cold rays emanating from Xiang Shaolong's eyes, her face became drained of colour and she subconsciously took two steps back.

This is precisely why Xiang Shaolong believes that it is better to be feared than to be loved. He strode right into the hall.

Feng Fei noticed him coming and felt awkward due to his inferior status. She introduced with a frown: "Shen Liang is our new General Manager. Come and greet Mister Tan."

Xiao Yuetan stood up and exchanged greetings with Xiang Shaolong at the same time. He laughed: "Brother Shen has an remarkable appearance. We must get to know each other better."

The three men escorting Xiao Yuetan are baffled. Xiao Yuetan is a proud character and seldom exhibits such warm gestures to anyone, moreover to lowly manager of a Song & Dance Troupe.

Even the founder of Shi Sufang's Song & Dance Troupe, Boss Jin, Jin Chenjiu has a much lower status compared to Shi Sufang. In the eyes of the rich and powerful, he is just a manservant with some influence. Shi Sufang is one of the other Three Courtesans.

Dong Shuzen, Yun Niang, Zhu Xiuzhen and the rest were equally mystified, unable to comprehend Xiao Yuetan's respectful treatment of Xiang Shaolong.

Only Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan know the underlying reason; and it is becoming quite challenging to conceal their excitement after seeing each other once again after some many years.

Xiao Yuetan invited Xiang Shaolong to sit down beside him and to avoid suspicion, he chatted up Feng Fei instead of him. Their topics hardly deviated from music composition, lyrics writing and poetry.

Xiang Shaolong knows nuts about these subjects and cannot join in the conversation.

Xin Yue, a petite courtesan who is a few notches prettier than Zhu Xiuzhen, commented: "I hear Mister Tan is an avid collector of folk songs and folklore. Among all the State Poems & Songs (Book collection), the Songs of Qi (book) is one of the more exciting. Mister will not leave Qi empty handed on this trip."

Xiao Yuetan's three associates are completely intoxicated with Feng Fei's charm. One of them, Zongsun Heji, a fine-looking scholar chuckled upon hearing her words: "Mister Tan has made two trips to Qi in the last few years. His collection is long completed!"

Xiang Shaolong knows Xiao Yuetan's character and that he detests dirty politics. He must have focus his abilities on poetry, music and the art, which unexpectedly turned out to be a good career move for him.

Dong Shuzen is elated: "Mister Tan must share with us what he has learnt."

With one hand stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan looked exceptionally dashing, reminding Xiang Shaolong of the first time he saw him in Handan (Capital of Zhao).

After so many years, he is likely to be in his forties by now but still maintained a robust and youthful disposition. It is no wonder why Yun Niang is so smitten with him.

After humbly excusing his incompetence (a polite gesture), he smoothly articulates: “Folk songs and folklore naturally embodies the local culture and heritage. Stories of joy and sorrow are common; while the most touching are the works of love and war. A broken man misses his wife; a chaotic country misses its generals. True love exists in every suffering. That is life.”

Yun Niang suggested: “The lyrics in folk songs are the bravest and most direct. The people of Qi reside near the sea and are very open-minded. The Songs of Qi must be highly explicit. Why don’t Mister Tan sing us a few lines to broaden our horizons.”

Faced with the pleading of the girls, Xiao Yuetan tapped the table and sang:

*Chicken crow in the morning
 Morning the sky bright
 Not chicken crow
 Flies are buzzing
 East horizon is bright
 The sun is up
 The east horizon is not bright
 It is moonshine
 Flies are dead
 I will dream with you
 You must go home
 If not will have rumours*

This song describes an emotional scene, where two lovers are meeting in a bedroom on a quiet night. Cursing the rooster, which crows at sunrise, waking them up from the sweet dreams, the lady persuades the gentleman to leave but the gentleman insisted it is the flies buzzing instead. When the lady pointed out that the eastern horizon is lighted, the gentlemen asserted it is moonshine. At her wit's end, the lady swore to continue sleeping with him if it is genuinely the flies buzzing but if he stayed on when he should be leaving, it will invite rumours.

The tune is simple, ordinary and easy to understand. The lyrics are sincere and yet exciting, portraying a real life situation and the descriptions are very lifelike. Sung by Xiao Yuetan's soulful and jazzy voice, everyone present is moved.

Even Xiang Shaolong is captivated by his singing when an angelic voice arose from Feng Fei's mouth, continuing the song and pairing the story:

East side the sun rises

Beautiful lady

In my house

In my house

From then till now

East side the moon rises

Beautiful lady

Inside my door?

With me?

Her song describes a rendezvous from the gentleman's point of view, singing about a beautiful lady entering his house at sunrise and joining him. Why did she come? Was it a coincidence or was she attracted by my singing, that she joined me on my journey.

This is the very first time Xiang Shaolong is hearing her sing. He finds her voice especially unique and is quite unlike the singing of Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang. Compared to the other courtesans he has heard of in the past, Feng Fei is light years ahead.

Not only is she a great singer, she does not follow the normal singing styles and has a rebellious streak. Her sentimental singing is like floating on water among streamingly colourful rainbows and fluffy clouds, carrying deep, unfathomable emotions. Her voice has a wide variation and she can reach all the different pitches. Merging her breathing into her singing, the lure of her song is limitless. She paints a mind-blowing picture with her lyrics and like a magnet, attracting all her listeners to pay full attention to her singing.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan and everyone else was cheering madly when she finished.

Xiao Yuetan was not the least upset Feng Fei stole his thunder. He frankly queried: "I have never heard of this song before. I wonder if this is Miss Feng's latest production?"

Feng Fei humbly replied: "It is indeed my new work. Pardon me for my inadequacies."

Xiao Yuetan and everyone were full of praise.

Seated on the other side of Xiao Yuetan, a strongman Youji sighed: "I have long heard about Miss Feng's divine singing. Now that I have finally met you and heard your singing, I can die without regrets."

Feng Fei modestly responded: "Mister You is giving me too much credit."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why Feng Fei deserves her title of the Head of the Three Courtesans and enjoyed first class treatment from the rich and powerful of every State.

Everyone will appreciate and treasure a talented beauty.

But if she officially retired, it will be a different story altogether.

Compared her brilliance, Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans are like the little stars beside the bright moon.

Xiao Yuetan professes: "The four of us are highly envious of Brother Shen. If you offer your job to the four of us, I can guarantee we will come to blows fighting for it."

Awaking from his stirrings, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Mister Tan sure knows how to crack a joke. This is actually the first time I am hearing Mistress sing a song!"

The four men were shocked; but only Xiao Yuetan's shock is faked.

Yun Niang explained the recent developments to them.

Zongsun Heji used this occasion to test Xiang Shaolong's abilities: "Does Manager Shen have any comments?"

Xiang Shaolong said the first thing that came to his mind: "Such a song belongs to the heaven and not the earth."

This time, even Feng Fei is moved.

Guilt ridden, Xiang Shaolong admitted: "I am just a greenhorn when it comes to music, but Mistress's song has made me lost my bearings."

Youji was amazed: "No wonder Mister Tan has such a good feeling about Brother Shen. Mister Tan is an excellent judge of character. Brother Shen's eloquence is seldom sighted. 'Greenhorn', 'Lost my bearings', these are all very appropriate and well-suited descriptions of the actual situation. Needless to say, the 'Such a song belongs to the heaven and not the earth' is a flawless depiction."

Xiang Shaolong knows it is not good to reveal too much about himself and kept quiet. He dared not face the attention that everyone is suddenly showing in him, especially from Feng Fei.

Dong Shuzen commended: "Mister Tan's earlier piece of Qi Song is immensely compelling. When Kong Qiu visited Qi and listened to a local music performance, he was so absorbed that his food was tasteless for three months and he called it the Perfection of Music."

Xiao Yuetan jested: "When I saw Miss Dong's 9-movement Dance last year, my food has remained tasteless ever since!"

Everyone had a good laugh. Dong Shuzen is rather pleased, having gained some acknowledgement.

Xiang Shaolong realized that Dong Shuzen is able to become Second in Command of the Song & Dance Troupe is due to her terrific dancing skills.

It was soon midnight and the four men were unwilling to take their leave.

Yun Niang is especially reluctant for Xiao Yuetan to leave. She sighed: "How I wish the ship is bigger, we can spend more time on the cruise and learn more about ancient cum modern music from Mister Tan."

Youji enthusiastically hinted: "As long as we have a bed to sleep on, we would be more than happy."

Dong Shuzen suggested: "We cannot subject you to such inconveniences. Nonetheless, we can probably create some additional sleeping quarters if gentlemen can lower your expectations..."

Zongsun Heji and the others were overjoyed and agreed in unison.

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong hinted: "I am staying alone, why don't ..."

The experienced Xiao Yuetan easily caught the hint and laughed: "Let me share the room with Brother Shen and learn more phrases from him. We can send for our gear tomorrow."

Back in the room, they blew out the candle and sat down on a corner of the cabin floor, reminiscing about the past.

Deep into the night, Xiao Yuetan has finished listening to Xiang Shaolong's fugitive encounters. He advised: "When Shaolong leads his army to war, there is no one who did not panic in the eastern states and there is a fear of your prowess everywhere. Even when you are alone without your army, you still create chaos wherever you go. Presently, Han, Zhao and Wei have laid heavy defences and ambushes on your returning path to Qin. It is too risky and not worth it to return to Qin straightaway."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "Any reactions from the people of Chu?"

Xiao Yuetan answered: "Absolutely no reaction from them. A man's heart is difficult to fathom and travelling through Chu may still not be safe. If you asked me, Shaolong should lie low and avoid the heat. When the three states are fully convinced that you have returned to Zhongmou, I can leisurely escort you back to Qin."

Pausing, he added: "I will have my confidantes report to Master Tu at Xianyang and he will relay the news to Yanran that you are safe with me. You can put your mind at ease and stay in Qi for an extended period."

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "You could recognize me without much difficulty, what about other people?"

Xiao Yuetan examined his face carefully and diagnosed: "You have kept a beard and with your loss in weight, your

appearance has been altered significantly. I can recognize you because I caught you staring at me first and I am been worried about you for the past two months. Never forget that I am a master of disguise and with some modifications, for example, trimming your beard, varying your hairstyle and letting you wear a headdress, I can guarantee that even Tian Dan cannot recognise you even if you stand face to face with him. After all, no one is more familiar with your physical features than I.” Pausing again, he laughed: “If you can learn the art of stuttering from me, there will be no more loopholes left in your disguise. As a manager, you will only interact with Tian Dan’s followers so please do not be overly worried.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his body being rejuvenated, gaining a new lease of life.

Honestly speaking, he cannot bear to part with Feng Fei too. He does not bear any ulterior motives towards her but merely desire to see her in action and at the same time, protecting her and assisting her to leave Qi unmolested.

He wondered: “If you are going to make changes to my appearance, wouldn’t it raise any suspicions within the Song & Dance Troupe?”

Xiao Yuetan coolly assured: “We can make gradual changes to your looks so the change will not be too obvious. They will probably associate the change due to your beard trimmings. Relax! Shaolong should know what I, Xiao Yuetan, is capable of.”

Invigorated, Xiang Shaolong calmly laughed: "I have no doubt about your abilities and in fact, my greatest admiration lies in your skirt-chasing skills."

Xiao Yuetan gushed: "Are you referring to Yun Niang and (Dong) Shuzen? These two bitches are super horny when the right buttons are pressed. Feel free to try them out for yourself if you don't believe me."

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: "You even managed to try Dong Shuzen?!"

Xiao Yuetan clarified: "Dong Shuzen has been laid by several men; this is hardly anything new. Her escort fee is the highest among all of them and one night with her will cost you an arm and a leg."

Xiang Shaolong scowled: "What is the difference between them and hookers?"

Xiao Yuetan enlightened: "Of course there is a difference. You must first win their favour and gain their affections before you can make the deal. The liaising contact used to be that bastard Zhang Quan, and you are now the new contact."

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted: "You mean I am now a pimp? A Papa-san (male version of mama-san)?"

Xiao Yuetan is confused: "What is a pimp? What is a papa-san?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Forget about these boring stuff. Who else will be coming to Qi to take part in the festivities?"

Xiao Yuetan coldly laughed: "Lu Buwei is one of them. With him around, you can be sure of trouble."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly had a brainwave. He recalled Dan Meimei mentioning that the Crown Prince of Qi has yet to be chosen.

In this juncture, the twisted hand of fate has miraculously drawn him into another life changing episode.

Isn't Qin at war with the Five States? Why is it possible for Lu Buwei to saunter into Qi in such a carefree manner?

In the same line of thought, the news-less Shan Rou came to his mind.

Will he see her in Lin Zi?

VOLUME 22

CHAPTER 1

History's Mystery

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIANG SHAOLONG sat cross-legged on the floor, allowing Xiao Yuetan who is kneeling behind him to work on his hair.

This old friend smirked: "I may be proficient in all methods of disguise but the practical application is rather limited. Now that I can put my expertise to good use on you is a rare occasion indeed."

Pausing, he continued: "I have your hair tied up in a different style and dyed several spots white, making you look several years older."

Xiang Shaolong is uncomfortable with it: "Does that mean I cannot wash my hair?"

Xiao Yuetan proudly proclaimed: "My personally crafted dye mixture cannot be washed off easily. But to be safe, we can re-dye from time to time."

He added: "We will reach the waters of Lin Zi in a few days. Your biggest challenge presently is to alter the way you speak. You cannot re-use the speaking manner you used while you were disguised as Dong Horse Fanatic. Let's train you to stutter and foolproof your disguise."

Xiang Shaolong confessed: "I will be lying if I say I am not worried. My biggest fear is my enemies recognizing me from my body build."

Xiao Yuetan burst out laughing: "Qi is originally part of Dongyi Tribe. The tribesmen are taller and have a bigger built than the average person. There may not be many men who are as tall as Shaolong but there is unquestionably a considerable amount. All Shaolong has to do is to act a little hunch-backed and not walk with your head raised and chest

puffed. That should prevent people from identifying you through your body build.”

Recalling that the people of Qi are the modern Shandong (China Province) people, famous for their height and build, Xiang Shaolong was relieved.

Xiao Yuetan took a glance at the sky through the cabin window and murmured: “The sky is brightening and we have chatted the entire night but I can only feel myself becoming more and more energized. I haven’t been so happy for a long time. Since Lu Buwei tried to kill us, I...”

Noticing Xiang Shaolong’s solemn expression, he apologized: “I shouldn’t have brought this up. Ai, thinking about it always gives me insomnia.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “The day of Crown Prince Coronation will be the same day Lu Buwei dies a horrible death. This is a fact that nobody can change.”

Xiao Yuetan obviously did not understand the full meaning of his historical prediction. He reminded: “Shaolong must not let your guard down. Lu Buwei has been in power for so long in Qin. He will not give up without a fight and watch passively as his authority dissipate into thin air.”

He softly confided: “On this trip to Qi, I harboured the possibility of assassinating him to avenge Third Princess (Zhao Qian) and myself. Now that Shaolong is here with me, I am confident that we can succeed.”

Xiang Shaolong is in a difficult position, because it is stated clearly in history books that Lu Buwei died in Qin during Xiao Pan's coronation. Any attempts to kill him in Lin Zi will surely end up in failure.

He naturally cannot divulge this and suggested instead: "We need to plan this in detail but I am not satisfied for him to die just like that. I want to personally destroy all that he has built and accumulated, piece by piece, as if I am cutting flesh from his body bit by bit. Only then will I be able to placate the hatred in my heart."

Xiao Yuetan nodded: "I can see where you are coming from. Ha! I'm done. Your resemblance to Xiang Shaolong is getting lesser and lesser! Wait till I get a bronze mirror to show you your new look. While there is still some time left, let's catch up on some sleep."

Barely asleep for an hour, Xiang Shaolong was awakened by the sound of the door opening. With the little light shining in the cabin just before sunrise, he peeped and saw Yun Niang slipping in. After she has determined Xiao Yuetan's bed, she snaked into his blankets. What speedily followed were sounds of Xiao Yuetan's playful protest, which was again quickly replaced by sounds of kissing.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. If not for Xiao Yuetan's coming, he will be the one Yun Niang is passionately kissing now.

He realized the importance of one's status in society.

When he used to be high ranking and held in importance, coupled with his good looks, he could effortlessly sweep women off their feet and won the hearts of many beauties.

With his current beggarly looks and lowly manager status, his attractiveness to women has largely declined.

Despite sounds of teasing and flirtation coming from the other bed, his mind is as calm as still water. He soon fell into deep slumber, having a good time with his wives and son in faraway Xianyang.

Incredibly, it was Xiao Yuetan who woke him up instead.

It was well into the day. Xiang Shaolong has been getting plenty of rest on this trip so even with just four short hours of rest; he can still start his day without any signs of tiredness. Witnessing Xiao Yuetan's highly invigorated countenance, he was astounded: "I thought you would still be fast asleep."

Xiao Yuetan awkwardly explained: "This woman is really desperate. Fortunately, the more women I make love to, the more revitalized I am. The ship is reaching the pier soon. I will send someone to deliver a secret message to Xianyang (City) Master Tu (Xian). Relax! Master and I communicate in a secret code. Even if the message falls into the wrong hands, the enemy will not be able to understand it."

Climbing out of his warm blankets, Xiang Shaolong cheered: "I have complete trust in your abilities."

Both men got to work after getting dressed.

Sure enough, the ship docked shortly at the pier. This is Xiang Shaolong's first time carrying out his duties as the General Manager. Luckily, Feng Fei sent her serving maid Little Ping'er to assist him. Little Ping'er is still dressed as a boy and together; they headed ashore to purchase supplies.

Except for food rations, other items procured included silk cloth and make up ingredients. They were kept busy for more than half a day and finally returned to the ship at sundown.

Throughout the day, Little Ping'er treated Xiang Shaolong in a rude and arrogant manner. Xiang Shaolong is not the least bit upset, as he believes that she is treating him simply as the lowly manager, which he is.

Riding back to the ship on their horses, Little Ping'er who was initially riding ahead slowed down her horse and was now riding beside Xiang Shaolong. She courteously advised: "Mistress (Feng Fei) wants me to remind you: Although you have been promoted to Manager, you must not be complacent and watch your own behavior. Don't follow Zhang Quan or Sa Li's negative example and ruin the good standing of our Song & Dance Troupe."

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted: "Your servant (polite way of saying I) does not comprehend what Sister is referring to."

Little Ping'er pouted her lips and coldly snorted: "You should know what you did. Someone reported seeing Yun Niang enter your room last night. Mister Tan is a man of integrity, a gentleman. This incident certainly has nothing to do with

him. Humph! How dare you deny it after you have hooked up with her.”

Xiang Shaolong was speechless.

He could not betray Xiao Yuetan and stain his prestigious reputation in the eyes of Feng Fei. He kept quiet and allowed himself to be his sacrificial lamb.

With a face full of scorn, Little Ping'er ignored him and rode ahead of him once again.

After having his dinner, Xiang Shaolong returned to his cabin. Xiao Yuetan was sitting on his bed, focusing on mixing his dye. He updated: “After spending several hours searching, I finally acquired these ingredients. I am planning to darken your facial skin, making you appear more rough and coarse.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down beside him and laughed: “Do you know I just became a scapegoat for you?”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: “What happened?”

Xiang Shaolong repeated Little Ping'er's accusation word for word.

After a moment's examination, Xiao Yuetan snickered: “That haughty youngster is plain jealous! Shaolong is really charismatic to cause her such anxiety.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned: “Brother Xiao must be joking!”

Xiao Yuetan articulated: “Shaolong is a wise man and I did not expect you to foolishly fall into her cunning trap. Think

about it! The weather is freezing nowadays. Everyone will be fast asleep at 4am in the morning; why would there be anyone around and coincidentally seeing Yun Niang entering our room with his or her own eyes. It must be Yun Niang's personal maid who discovered her Mistress (Yun Niang) leaving her bedroom and told the pretty tomboy about it. She must have guessed that Yun Niang has come for you and tested your reaction. She has found out the truth except that she nailed the wrong guy."

Xiang Shaolong lost his tongue.

Xiao Yuetan guffawed: "Except for Feng Fei, what good standing is there in the Song & Dance Troupe? Do you believe Feng Fei doesn't know about my trysts with Yun Niang? I am a famous playboy after all. That green-eyed monster Ping'er deliberately used Feng Fei's name to put you down!"

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth: "One of these days I am going to give her a taste of her own medicine."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "The best medicine is served under the blankets. Use you manhood to conquer her."

Xiang Shaolong exhaled: "I am not in the mood for relationships right now. But I'll definitely make trouble for her to appease my anger. Moreover, I can tell that she detests me."

Xiao Yuetan disagreed: "She will not approach you with that reminder if she is not concerned about you. You are an expert with women yourself and should know that a

woman's heart is irrational. The more they seek to irritate you, the more they adore you."

Xiang Shaolong does not want to continue this discussion. Changing the topic, he queried: "Why didn't I see your companions coming back to the ship?"

Xiao Yuetan answered: "Are you referring to Zongsun Heji and the others? I tricked them into going back to my ship, just in case they start becoming suspicious about our close relationship. To be honest, I used the same trick as Little Ping'er, using Feng Fei's name to scare them away."

Looking at each other, both men burst out laughing at the same time.

Xiao Yuetan carefully hid the freshly grounded dye mixture into his luggage chest and clapped his hands, inviting: "Feng Fei is having a rehearsal tonight and has requested me to give her some pointers. Care to come along?"

Xiang Shaolong lay down in his bed, dismissing: "If I don't see you later tonight, I will know you are in Yun Niang's room."

Xiao Yuetan shook his head smilingly and left.

Music was soon heard playing in the upper decks but Xiang Shaolong was doing some deep reflections instead.

After countless trials and tribulations, he eventually still cannot avoid making a trip to Qi. He wondered if the trip will be beneficial for him or is he heading for another disaster

The Warring States are Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei, Han and Qin. Except for the capitals of Yan and Han, he has stepped foot in the others.

On his return trip to Qin, Xiao Yuetan may well take him through the capital of Han. Thus, he probably has no fate with the capital of Yan.

He recalled Prince Dan from Yan as well as all the Lords from other States that he has met before. The last face he envisioned is the 'pretty face' of Lord Longyang. Unknowingly, he was losing the urge to sleep.

The ship will continue sailing tomorrow morning. He wondered if he would meet this 'traitorous' friend in Lin Zi.

In these war-ridden times, everyone is fighting for the country or Lord he is loyal to. Even he is of no exception.

To a certain extent, Xiang Shaolong is loyal to history. He is charting his life to be as accurate to history as he can.

All these events and circumstances have been lined up by the hands of Fate. Xiang Shaolong is basically executing the will of Fate.

Here comes the golden question!

Without him, will history be the same?

Logically, history will be altered. At least there is no way Xiao Pan can become Qin Shihuang without his intervention.

Without Qin Shihuang, China may never be unified.

Such an ambitious man like Qin Shihuang does not often appear in the history of China.

He strongly disputed the fact that Qin can unite China without Qin Shihuang.

To be fair, he is a time traveller who already knew the future. His judgments may be bias.

A simple change can determine victory or defeat.

If Qin does not possess men of talent like Wang Jian, Li Si and even himself, conquering the other Six States will remain a dream and never a reality.

If this is the case, why wasn't Xiang Shaolong a historical figure?

Thinking about this, he broke out into cold sweat.

When he used to ponder about this issue, it was normally envisaged in a fleeting moment.

Currently, he has nobody to distract him and he was bored to tears, thus, he can contemplate more profoundly about this issue.

He did suggest to Xiao Pan to forget everything about himself (Xiang Shaolong) because he was afraid of something even more horrendous.

When it comes to the day when Xiao Pan thought of this on his own without Xiao Shaolong's suggestion, it would mean the end of him (Xiang Shaolong).

At the end of the day, the only obstacle to Xiao Pan's ascension to the throne is his Zhao origin.

The intelligent Lu Buwei knows part of the secret and will only get more suspicious when Xiao Pan totally disregarded him as his father.

Thinking back to the occasion when he did a blood test between Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei, proving to (Qin General) Lu Gong & Company that they are not father and son, it was indeed an earth-shattering feat in the eyes of (Master) Tu Xian. The secret is another loophole for Xiao Pan and has to be protected from Lu Buwei at all costs.

Thinking about it, he shook with fear.

Only Zhu Ji and himself know the location of the family who raised Yingzheng (Zhu Ji's son). If Zhu Ji ever shares this information with Lao Ai, Xiao Pan's life will be critically endangered.

Judging from Xiao Pan's character, he will not allow anyone to challenge his authority.

He may not kill himself (Xiang Shaolong).

But what about Zhu Ji?

Knock! Knock!

Knocking was heard on the cabin door.

Xiang Shaolong sat up in surprise. "Who it it?!" he demanded.

Creak!

The door swings open.

A serving maid entered his cabin and joyfully greeted: "Hello Manager Shen! Going to bed already?"

Xiang Shaolong recognised her as courtesan Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning. Just barely yesterday was she trying to chase him out of the ship's hall and now she is all smiling, friendly and sweet. Puzzled, he questioned: "What can I do for Sister Ning?"

With her small mouth curved in a cute smile, Little Ning sat down beside him and smiled: "I am here to seek your forgiveness! Wow! Manager Shen is really sleeping so early?"

Witnessing her intimate behavior, Xiang Shaolong became wary and officially state: "Doesn't Sister Ning have to wait on Mistress Zhu Xiuzhen?"

Inching closer, Little Ning flirted: "I am here on Mistress's orders. Ai! This trip is so lonesome. I wouldn't mind some company myself."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Why is your Mistress looking for me?"

Little Ning cheekily replied: "Can you please don't treat me like your enemy? Hee hee! But you look very domineering when you are angry and it is very appealing to me. How I wish I can let you punish me and let you do whatever you want to me."

Xiang Shaolong is a man after all and could not help but feel aroused. He scrutinized this maid from top to toe.

She is positively below eighteen and her looks are average. Nonetheless, her long lashes, seductive eyes, jutting breasts, slim waist, long legs and her good skin complexion is a big draw for him. He can start to feel some temptation for her.

Just as he was deliberating whether to hug her into his arms, he also felt that it was an inappropriate gesture and was in a dilemma. Before he can make up his mind, Little Ning revealed: "Unfortunately, it is Mistress who has eyes for you. I can only wait until she is done with you."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, he stuttered: "Your Mistress,..."

Little Ning nodded: "You should know which room belongs to Mistress. Tonight after midnight, she will be waiting for you in her room. You just have to push the door to enter. Hee! After the deed is done, you must not forget my effort in bringing the two of you together!"

She slipped out after she finished talking.

Xiang Shaolong sat there like an idiot.

In terms of looks, Zhu Xiuzhen comes in third after Feng Fei and Dong Suzhen within the Song & Dance Troupe. She usually stares at him with such hatred and contempt. In reality, she is masking her affections from him.

This is a one-night stand initiated by her, should he take up her offer?

If Feng Fei hears about it, what would she think of him?

Ever since leaving Xianyang (City), except for a session with Qiuling in Daliang (Capital of Wei), Xiang Shaolong has been leading a celibate and lonely life. With his current cozy environment and his sexual desires re-ignited by the wanton woman Yun Niang, he is intuitively aroused when a dazzling courtesan offers him such an opportunity.

All his sleepiness vanished into thin air.

Needless to say, this eye catching Little Ning must be sharing Zhu Xiuzhen's cabin bedroom. If he took up the invitation, he may well end up in a threesome.

He suddenly felt guilty and embarrassed.

Back at home, the Talented Lady Ji and the others are worried sick for him and yet he is here having a good time with other women. How can he face his own conscience if he went ahead with his trysts?

He did not have a choice when he made love to Qiuling but he absolutely has no justification if he wants to make love to Zhu Xiuzhen.

He hardened his resolve and lay down once again onto his bed, covering himself with his blanket.

Xiao Yuetan happened to come back to the room this minute, humming a tune happily.

Xiang Shaolong was piqued: "Why would Yun Niang be willing to release you?"

Xiao Yuetan absentmindedly danced a few steps and responded: "This is one of my beliefs when it comes to taking care of my health. We cannot do without sex but we cannot go overboard with it too. Let me tell you something new. Dong Shuzen is implying to me that she is open to a relationship with me and hinted that I can also have her 'sister' Zhu Xiuzhen as well. Looks like they have a favour to ask of me."

Hearing this, Xiang Shaolong turned quiet and became disinterested.

It is apparent that Zhu Xiuzhen is a free for all.

Seeing that Xiang Shaolong has something on his mind, Xiao Yuetan pondered for a while before asking: "You having trouble sleeping?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "I was about to fall asleep but I was awakened by someone!"

Xiao Yuetan sat down and probed him for the reason.

After Xiang Shaolong finished telling his story, Xiao Yuetan reflected on it and abruptly exclaimed: "What a close shave! This is definitely a trap!"

CHAPTER 2

Going Along With The Plan

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIANG SHAOLONG was taken aback: “Why do you say it’s a trap?”

Xiao Yuetan surmised: “Few individuals are my match when it comes to plotting and trickery. When you told me how you managed to rise to your current position, I already smell a rat and paid extra attention to everyone and everything around me. Not only does Zhang Quan hates you to the core, Dong Shuzen and the courtesans close to her can’t wait to

see the last of you. Given such circumstances, Zhu Xiuzhen's invitation can only be a trap."

Xiang Shaolong sobered up and cursed his own inattentiveness. He nodded: "I suppose when something sounds too good to be true, it probably is! Fortunately, I had no intention of going anyway."

Xiao Yuetan was baffled: "Since when did our great Xiang Shaolong become so easy going? As the saying goes: It is hard to fight external battles when the internal battles are not won yet. If we do not use this opportunity to diminish our enemies' influence, the schemes coming from these women coupled with that bastard will catch you off guard one day. Moreover, you have promised Feng Fei to assist her in resisting the men lusting over her. If you do not counter attack them with some trickery, how are you going to prove yourself to her?"

Xiang Shaolong was awkward: "I am not used to scheming against women and I always have a soft spot for them. In addition, I have no clue how I can counter this beauty trap."

Xiao Yuetan beat his own chest with confidence: "Firstly, let me analyze the entire scenario. From my conversation with Yun Niang last night, I found out that Dong Shuzen and Zhang Quan are sleeping partners; and the same goes for Sa Li and Zhu Xiuzhen. They are not genuine lovers but just trading sex for power and vice versa. Now that Sa Li has been dismissed and Zhang Quan demoted, you have

indirectly antagonize both Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen. You are in a perilous state right now.”

Hugging his blanket, Xiang Shaolong concluded: “This is Feng Fei making use of me to restructure the Song & Dance Troupe. Otherwise, why should she trust a complete stranger like me?”

Xiao Yuetan agreed: “Feng Fei is a scheming beauty and is even more cunning than a fox. You have become one of her chess pieces. I can sense that she dare not offend Dong Shuzhen; otherwise, even Zhang Quan will be dismissed along with Sa Li. Ha! What kind of trap is Zhu Xiuzhen laying for you? I don’t think she has the courage to kill you. It is most likely she will malign you for entering her bedroom with an ulterior motive, pressuring Feng Fei to sack you from the troupe.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “That sounds like a good deal to me. If I can leave the troupe, you can then engage me as a driver or a manservant. By then, no one will be able to identify me!”

Xiao Yuetan exhaled: “Going over to my side is even more dangerous. Many of my shipmates have seen your WANTED portrait and someone may recognize you after spending more time with you. That is why I tricked Gongsun Heji and the others back to my ship. Only when I have completed your disguise can you interact more freely with them.”

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “What should we do now?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head, smiling: “Zhu Xiuzhen is only adept at using her body to trap men. Shaolong, are you interested to try out this woman? I guarantee that it will be a memorable session and you will not be disappointed.”

Xiang Shaolong’s excitement is beginning to stir but he quickly suppressed it. He rejected: “I am not used to making love to a woman who has no feelings for me, nor do I want to overpower her in such a manner. If Feng Fei knows about our relationship, she will have a bad impression of me. So this is undoable.”

Xiao Yuetan concurred: “I forgot that you are a true gentleman. Since this is the case, let’s give her a scare and teach this wanton woman a good lesson.”

He continued detailing his plan in soft whispers.

As the river wind blows through the air, Xiang Shaolong snaked out of his cabin through the cabin window. Using his climbing equipment, he hooked up the higher decks and stepped on horizontal planks protruding from the ship’s body. Like a lizard, he shimmied towards Zhu Xiuzhen’s bedroom.

Luckily, the layer of ice formed on the ship’s external wall has melted away due to the rise in temperature. Otherwise, it will be a precarious climb even with the hooks and ropes.

There is complete silence on the ship and the shore is equally noiseless. Under such hostile weather, everyone will want to snuggle in their warm bed and blankets.

Every time he passes through a cabin window, he has to stoop down.

He has to travel past ten odd cabins and only a few of the cabins are still illuminated with a faint candlelight. Zhu Xiuzhen's cabin is obviously not one of them.

The three rooms nearest to the ship's front belong to Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, the three most influential courtesans. Yun Niang's room is on the opposing side.

As Xiang Shaolong's room is nearer to the ship's tail, he has to climb a long distance, through several sections of the ship before he can arrive at Zhu Xiuzhen's window.

It is a different world being inside the cabin and outside the ship. Besides the difference in temperature, it also evokes a different kind of feeling.

Xiang Shaolong was humoured.

He resembles a hero from Wuxia (sword-fighting) novels who can scale walls and jump from roof to roof. The only disparity is: He is not fighting for justice but simply trying to preserve his existence.

Xiao Yuetan's assessment of Feng Fei has made him more wary of this beauty.

As the saying goes: Never trust anyone. He is too gullible and even more so in front of good-looking women. His mind has subconsciously given him the impression that these women are equally beautiful on the inside. A woman's heart is hard to fathom. Right now, Zhu Xiuzhen is a living example.

Xiang Shaolong retrieved his grappling hooks and shot them out again, further and higher. Using the momentum, he repeated this step a few times and finally landed outside Zhu Xiuzhen's window.

The room is so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

He was about to draw out his dagger and pry open the window when he heard intermittent sounds of moaning coming from Dong Shuzhen's window up ahead.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and curious at the same time. He couldn't help but inched forward to her window and place his ear again the wall.

Who could be in Dong Shuzhen's room?

He was in a state of shock after hearing what followed.

It turns out that the two person making love in the room are both women and he could hear them screaming in ecstasy as they reached their orgasm.

It appears that Dong Shuzhen is a bi-sexual.

He was about to leave when Dong Shuzhen praised in a hoarse voice: "Xiuzhen is really good."

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Why is Zhu Xiuzhen in Dong Shuzhen's room? And who is in Zhu Xiuzhen's room right now?

Didn't Yun Niang tell Xiao Yuetan that Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen are hooked up with Zhang Quan and Sa Li

respectively? In that case, Dong Shuzen should be opposing Zhu Xiuzhen instead. Why are they a lesbian couple now?

While he was in a state of confusion, Zhu Xiuzhen panted: "To think that you are still in the mood to tease me. That fellow should be making his way here soon. If we continue making out, we will not be able to hear him entering my room."

Dong Shuzen giggled: "All we need to hear is Xinyue's cries of rape!"

Zhu Xiuzhen pondered: "I only switched rooms with Xinyue tonight. Will this arouse Mistress's (Feng Fei) suspicions?"

Dong Shuzen sniggered: "This is the best part of the scheme. Even if Feng Fei suspects us of any misdeeds, she will also see for herself that Shen Liang is just a pervert. He is newly promoted to manager but is already trying to get fresh with the courtesans. How can he shoulder heavy responsibilities in the future? Besides, she has to bear with us because without us, there is no way she can hope to win Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang."

Zhu Xiuzhen reflected on her words for a while and whispered: "I really cannot understand what a prestigious person like Mister Tan sees in that lowly servant Shen Liang."

Xiang Shaolong was just about to leave but upon hearing her comment, he continued to eavesdrop.

Dong Shuzen sighed: "This fellow has certain abilities and his fighting skills alone is heart-stopping. If not for the fact that he is above bribing, I don't mind letting him take advantage of me."

Xiang Shaolong doesn't have an inkling why is Dong Shuzen coming up with all these schemes. He wished that she will divulge more of her plans but when their silence is interrupted by sounds of light moaning, he lost all interest and returned back to his cabin.

After Xiao Yuetan heard his story, he was greatly amused too. He ran the thoughts over his mind and slapped his thigh, exclaiming: "I have a plan. We can turn their scheme around to attack Zhu Xiuzhen and increase your standing within the Song & Dance Troupe."

Xiang Shaolong quickly asked him for the details.

Xiao Yuetan whispered: "You can write a letter. Inside the letter, you can express your gratitude for Zhu Xiuzhen's love but you are unable to accept her affections and ask for her forgiveness at the same time. We will place the letter under the door to Zhu Xiuzhen's original room, now occupied by Xinyue. In this case, we can expose their scam and at the same time, prove that you are a man who can resist such temptations."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "This cannot be accomplished. I can fight or lead an army to war but writing a letter is simply beyond me."

Xiao Yuetan was in a daze and laughed: "I did not think of that. Well, I suppose I can write the letter for you but you have to sign it yourself. Just remember not to sign Xiang Shaolong on it."

Solving this difficulty for good, Xiang Shaolong can feel his shoulders lightening and laughed together with Xiao Yuetan.

Early next morning, the ships began sailing, continuing their journey.

After having breakfast in their rooms, Xiao Yuetan joined the courtesans at the ship's front deck, enjoying themselves as they admired the picturesque scenery on both sides of the shore. Xiang Shaolong is kept busy as he learnt the ropes as the troupe manager.

As expected, Little Ping'er was guiding him on the side.

He may be thinking too much but Little Ping'er's attitude towards him seemed to have improved. When they were auditing the new purchases at the basement of the ship, she asked out of the blue: "Why did you take the rap for someone else?"

Xiang Shaolong was confounded: "What rap are you talking about?"

Her face reddening, Little Ping'er replied: "Last night, I discovered that Yun Niang's partner is Mister Tan and realized that I have wronged you. Why didn't you refute my accusations?"

Xiang Shaolong deliberately provoked her: “Didn’t you mention that Mister Tan is an upright and righteous gentleman? Furthermore, Sister Ping’er did not give me a chance to speak out. My conscience is clear and I do not owe you an explanation. So I guess Sister Ping’er will not despise me anymore?”

Little Ping’er is greatly embarrassed and changed the topic: “You seemed to have aged a bit over the past two days. Even your hair is turning white.”

Xiang Shaolong was panicking inside but acted like nothing is out of the ordinary. He laughed: “There are people whose hair grew white overnight; I am considered to be lucky as I only have a little bit of white hair.”

Little Ping’er knows that he is hinting that he was so worried about her misunderstanding him that his hair turned slightly white. She was surprisingly pleased and shot him a look before resuming an official expression, instructing him on his responsibilities.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing his heart out. Teasing cute babes is one of life’s little happiness.

Oddly, Feng Fei summoned him to join her for lunch. Xinyue was invited as well.

Xiang Shaolong of course know what this is all about but he feigns innocence.

Feng Fei took this opportunity to ask him about his new duties before going straight to the point: "Does Manager Shen know that he was nearly a victim of a vicious plot?"

Xiang Shaolong acted surprised: "Your servant (polite way of saying I) does not understand Mistress's words."

Opposite him, Xinyue clarified: "At Zhu Xiuzhen's request, I switched rooms with her last night and I became the recipient of your 'love' letter. Does Manager Shen understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be angry at being cheated. He cursed: "So she is planning to harm me."

Revealing a gentle expression, Feng Fei praised: "You did not disappoint me. Whoever I hired in the past will eventually succumb to their advances. Manager Shen is the only exception."

Xinyue commended: "I did not expect Manager Shen to have such good writing skills too!"

Xiang Shaolong frankly admitted: "That was written by Mister Tan after I begged him to help me. Except for being able to sign my own name, the rest of my writing is unintelligible."

Feng Fei nodded: "You are willing to speak the truth. That is very rare. But Manager Shen is extremely eloquent and knows a wide variety of proverbs. Why are you unable to write a simple letter?"

Xiang Shaolong obviously cannot reveal the truth. He lied: “I have read a few books but did not practice my writing.”

Xinyue was startled: “Manager Shen must be the son of an official. Ordinary folks will not get to read books.”

Xiang Shaolong is facing the ‘identity interrogation’ of his lifetime. During those ancient times, the printing press is not invented yet and every single book is hand copied onto cloth or bamboo. Books are not commonly found and are considered precious items. If not for ancient scholars starting public schools to educate the masses, only the rich and powerful are entitled to learning words and becoming literate.

If the two ladies continued asking about the books he has read before and their authors and such, his lies will be exposed.

He sprouted nonsense: “I came across some books while serving Great General Lian (Po).”

Feng Fei bought his story and assured: “Zhu Xiuzhen’s scheme is a small matter. In the future, even if someone disparages you, I will not believe it.”

Xinyue appears to be quite fond of Xiang Shaolong. She suggested: “When we are rehearsing our routine later, it will be good to have Manager Shen around. It will be good for you to know about our manpower arrangement together with the props we will be using. Can you be there?”

Xiang Shaolong acquiesced.

Feng Fei abruptly let out a sigh, frowning her two delicate eyebrows.

Xiang Shaolong may be used to seeing pretty faces but he cannot deny that she has one of the most elegant eyebrows he has ever seen.

The eyebrows looked like they are personally hand painted by the Creator, crescent-shaped and simply flawless.

Xinyue sighed with her and murmured: “Mistress must be feeling perplexed over that issue again! This trip to Lin Zi, we must not lose to the Three Courtesans Troupe and the Soft Boned beauty.”

Xiang Shaolong has nothing to add.

If they need a swordsman for a duel, he can absolutely do his part. But in this aspect, he is unable to make a contribution.

From Feng Fei’s expression, he can guess that she is having some difficulties over the Song & Dance arrangements.

Being in the creative industry, Feng Fei would certainly want a breakthrough.

This also means challenging her own ways of thinking and doing things, to break her own mold. Needless to say, it is not easy to reinvent yourself.

Feng Fei’s expression became slightly downcast and she kept mum.

Xinyue is the one continuing the conversation and specially reminded Xiang Shaolong to come to their rehearsal tonight.

After taking his leave, Xiang Shaolong was about to return to his room and corroborate his story with Xiao Yuetan when someone called out from his back: "Shen Liang!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around. It is the 'matchmaker from hell' coquettish maid Little Ning.

She rushed along the long corridor towards him, speaking in a loud voice: "Why didn't you come over last night? Mistress waited tirelessly for you the entire night."

Xiang Shaolong apologized: "I was waiting in bed but I accidently fell asleep as I was too tired. I beg your pardon Sister Ning."

Little Ning was infuriated: "You are really incorrigible. Mistress is very upset with you now!"

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders, giving her a helpless look, stunning Little Ning with his indifference. He turned back and started walking towards the wooden steps linked to the lower deck.

Little Ning caught up to him and pulled his sleeve, admonishing: "You are going to just go off like that? How are you going to redeem yourself?"

To prevent her from harassing him, Xiang Shaolong faced her and directly offered: "The person I like is actually you, Sister Ning. Why don't you accompany me instead!"

Little Ning apparently knows about making out and glared at him, chiding: "Do you want me to be thrown out by Mistress? Ai. Since you are such a nice person, I will try to salvage the situation for you!" Xiang Shaolong is becoming impatient and coaxed: "Love cannot be forced. Sister Ning need not worry about this. Why don't you come to my room tonight?"

Seeing that her plan has failed, Little Ning was worried: "How can we use your room? Mister Tan is your roommate."

Stretching his hand out to pinch her cute face, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Mister Tan is a considerate man and will not mind at all."

Finishing, he walked off, laughing inside his heart.

Back in his room, he shared his story with Xiao Yuetan. Both men found his encounters hilarious.

Xiao Yuetan began to dye his hair and beard. In the middle of the disguise session, someone came to summon Xiao Yuetan at the request of Feng Fei. Both men were shocked and hastily hide the entire disguise apparatus.

Alone, Xiang Shaolong is about to take an afternoon nap. Unexpectedly, Zhang Quan came looking for him. Zhang Quan appear very amicable, the complete opposite of his former self.

After he got seated, Zhang Quan officially state: "Brother Shen used to serve Prince Wuji. Apparently, you want to

make a name and fortune for yourself. I want to make a deal with Brother Shen and see if we can reach an agreement.”

Xiang Shaolong already knew he has an ulterior motive for coming. He plainly requested: “Brother Zhang please speak your mind!”

Zhang Quan confessed: “I did harbor ill intentions when I first hired Brother Shen as a carriage driver. However, you cannot pin all the blame on me. This is not an easy role to fulfill. You will know what I mean when we arrive at Lin Zi. Those rich men and powerful officials viewed us as lowly servants and we will be in trouble if we let our guard down. After being angry when they failed to gain Mistress’s (Feng Fei) attention, they will vent their frustrations on us. If Brother Shen is willing to work with me, I will definitely take care of you like my own brethren. After all, I have been the troupe manager for the past two years.”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. He prompted: “Brother Zhang, please come straight to the point.”

Zhang Quan’s eyes rotated a few rounds before leaning forward, divulging: “The biggest advantage when working with me is that Brother Shen can enjoy pleasures of the flesh. Except for a few untouchables, I can even get Second Mistress (Dong Shuzen) to sleep with you.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and chortled: “Brother Zhang must be kidding me.”

Zhang Quan hurriedly swore an oath that he is telling the absolute truth before adding: “As long as Brother Shen is

willing to follow my advice, I can reward you with five ingots of gold now. When the mission is accomplished, I will give you another ten ingots.”

Xiang Shaolong is amazed.

Fifteen ingots of gold is not a small sum and can allow anyone to lead a luxurious life for many years. Where did Zhang Quan get his money from?

Thinking about this, he can safely predict that Zhang Quan has been bribed by someone rich, powerful and has evil designs on Feng Fei.

CHAPTER 3

Ancient Opera

[Translated by JUSTIN14]

XIANG SHAOLONG observed Zhang Quan beating around the bush and not going straight to the point. He guessed Zhang Quan is testing his limits before revealing the full picture. He affirmed: "The money is very tempting and I would hate to be Brother Zhang's enemy; however, Mistress (Feng Fei) and I have an affinity for each other. I will not repay her trust with malice."

His words are tactfully chosen, making his stand clear that he will not do anything against Feng Fei's interest.

Zhang Quan cunningly scoffed: "Brother Shen is mistaken! Why would I cause any harm to Mistress (Feng Fei)? For the past few days, I admit that I am upset with her for demoting me. But thinking back, it was my own fault. Thus, I do not have the right to bear any grudges."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "What does Brother Zhang expect of me? Whatever I can do, Brother Zhang can do better. There is no need for you to lose those glittering pieces of gold into my pocket!"

Zhang Quan leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "Are you aware than Little Ping told somebody she has affections towards yourself?"

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "What has this got to do with the deal? Anyway, I don't believe she will tell anybody she likes me."

Zhang Quan snickered: "She did not say it out word for word but she often talks about you in front of the others. Based on her personality, it is as clear as day that she has taken a serious liking to you."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head aching.

In the present situation, he cannot allow himself to be entangled in any relationships. Moreover, he is too softhearted when it comes to handling the fairer sex. All these complications will only add to his burdens and he secretly warned himself to resist such temptations. He rejected: "Brother Zhang need not speak any further. Making use of Sister Ping to achieve our goals is beyond me.

How about this? I will plead with Mistress (Feng Fei) to promote you back to your original appointment and I will serve as your Assistant Manager. We will all be on good terms once again; isn't this better than all the daily infighting?"

Noticing his resolute countenance, Zhang Quan was irked and cursed: "Brother Shen is too naïve. Do you really believe that you are promoted to my ex-position because Mistress (Feng Fei) believes in your abilities? She is only using you as a scapegoat! In fact, she is already in love with a mystery man. After her trip to Lin Zi, she will disappear with him to an undisclosed location, leading a life of seclusion and happiness. According to my estimations, she will pretend to develop feelings for you and use you as a diversion, drawing attention away from the real culprit. You will die a wrongful death."

Xiang Shaolong was outraged: "Who is that man?"

Zhang Quan groaned: "I will not have come to you if I know who he is. Except for Little Ping'er, nobody knows about Feng Fei's affairs."

Xiang Shaolong's opinion of Feng Fei is becoming less and less favourable.

And it is all because Zhang Quan's words make perfect sense.

Feng Fei is as wise as an owl. She is unlikely to place all her hopes and safety in his hands and yet she gave him such an impression. She is obviously trying to stir up his heroism,

painting herself as a helpless damsel who requires his protection. In actual fact, she could have easily planned her own retreat from Qi.

On the other hand, Zhang Quan has been bribed by someone to destroy her grand plan and detain her for his (the rich person) personal enjoyment. Even if he (rich person) cannot win her love, he will have her body.

Feng Fei is like a limited, top quality gem, which everyone wishes to acquire. Although no one can openly use force to obtain her, there will be countless schemes to achieve the same result.

The circumstances are unbelievable.

He was unlucky enough to be drawn into this turmoil.

Zhang Quan assumed that Xiang Shaolong has changed his mind. He took his money pouch out from his bosom and counted five ingots of gold. He put his arm around Xiang Shaolong's shoulders and gently persuaded: "My mastermind is a high ranking and influential man in Qi. He is one in a million. Brother Shen only need to do your job well and you may be even rewarded with an official post. He loves Mistress (Feng Fei) whole-heartedly and will give her a good life. At the end of the day, take it that we are doing Mistress a huge favour."

There is no way Xiang Shaolong will trust his words.

But if he puts himself in Zhang Quan's shoes, he will too bluff about have a rich and powerful backer in Qi because it is indeed an effective way to coerce the weak into submitting.

Xiang Shaolong plainly requested: "Let me try to understand the situation more thoroughly before I commit to a decision. Brother Zhang, please keep your gold for the time being. Ai! Regardless I work with you or not, you should give me some time to consider your proposal." Looking at his unwavering appearance, Zhang Quan nodded: "All right, but you must give me an answer by the time we arrive in Lin Zi."

After Zhang Quan left, Xiang Shaolong is still fixated in his daydream.

Will Feng Fei really use him as a scapegoat for the man of her dreams?

With her refined and lovely facade, it is hard to imagine that she is such a despicable person.

From the beginning, he had assumed Zhang Quan to be Dong Shuzen's lapdog, but it is apparently not true after analyzing his (Zhang Quan) tone.

Dong Shuzen is trying her best to get rid of him, while Zhang Quan is trying his best to bribe him. Their actions are contradictory to each other.

He is getting more and more muddle-headed when Xiao Yuetan returned to the room.

Listening to Xiang Shaolong's exchange with Zhang Quan, Xiao Yuetan frowned: "Never in my wildest imagination did I

expect Feng Fei's retirement to cause such a big hoo-ha. It appears to me there is indeed a mastermind trying all means and ways to have Feng Fei all for himself. To a certain extent, Zhang Quan's words sounds logical. Feng Fei enjoys the respect of numerous Kings and Lords. If she takes the trouble to ask for assistance, she will have no lack of capable men coming forward to offer their protection. And yet she has to be so secretive about the whole thing. Thus, I conclude that her mystery lover is someone unique, maybe even someone who has a lowly status. Exposing this person's identity will cause disaster to befall upon him."

Compared to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan has a better understanding about the mentality of the rich and powerful. He queried: "Is Feng Fei so wicked that she will really use me as her scapegoat?"

Xiao Yuetan grinned: "Let's wait and observe the situation further. I am sure things will be clearer after some surveillance. Our Shaolong is no pushover after all; whoever dares to scheme against us can expect a scheme in return."

Xiang Shaolong agreed.

Who would have thought that such a small Song & Dance Troupe would involve such complications?

CHAPTER 4

Knee Deep in Trouble

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AS Xiang Shaolong is well rested, his mind is especially alert and his five senses are exceedingly delicate. Facing the probability that this lady in front of him can be Dong Shuzen, Xinyue, Zhu Xiuzhen or even the unlikely Little Ping'er, he is excited beyond words.

After expending a tremendous amount of willpower, he managed to evade her lips and whispered into her ears: "Who are you?"

The mysterious lady cooed: "Do you have many women who come to you like this?"

Xiang Shaolong cannot recognize her faked voice and laughed: "It is the exact opposite! If another woman had come to me in such a manner, I would have mistaken you for her! Why would I bother to ask about your identity?"

The lady held tightly to his waist and buried her face into his chest, purring: "It is also possible that you have many ladies coming to you and you could not tell them apart."

Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure that this lady cannot be Little Ping'er or Xinyue as Little Ping'er is still angry with him and Xinyue should know that he values his chastity and is not easily tempted.

Groping her, Xiang Shaolong countered: "If this is the case, I should be able to tell who you are by feeling you and need not question you further."

The lady murmured to herself and appeared to be moved by his words.

Xiang Shaolong cannot hold back his inhibitions any longer. He flipped over, hugging and pressing her down tightly. Concurrently, he reached for a fire stick at his bedside table.

The lady gave a shrill cry, pulling his hand back, exclaiming: "Are you trying to embarrass me? This is the worst time to put the lights on. Let's begin!"

All Xiang Shaolong needed was some starlight to see her features but it was a cloudy night and on top of that, both of

them are still covered by the blanket. Xiang Shaolong is as good as blind.

On the other hand, it is this kind of ignorance that caused him to be greatly aroused.

The lady should be one of the three ladies: Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen or Little Ping'er. Every one of them is good-looking, voluptuous and can mesmerize a man with a look or a smile. He is immensely ecstatic and cannot resist this physical invasion.

If not for the layers of clothes between them, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can hold his ground until now.

At the back of his mind, Xiang Shaolong gingerly felt that if he conquered the lady now, he would be no different from a common pervert. Indirectly, he has lost his self-control and surrendered himself to a strange intruder.

Which is why despite the lady's caressing, the strong lure of enticement and even with an erection, Xiang Shaolong persisted in suppressing the raging flames of passion. Pushing his upper body slightly away, he purposely lied: "I know who you are!"

Below his body, the lady trembled slightly and responded: "So, who am I?"

Based on her shocked reaction, Xiang Shaolong can tell that the lady did not expect Xiang Shaolong to correctly guess her identity.

This meant that she couldn't be Dong Shuzhen or Zhu Xiuzhen as these two courtesans have tried to seduce him and have hinted him to bed them. The two of them will not react in such a manner.

Out of the blue, he was hit by an outrageous revelation. Xiang Shaolong stuttered: "First Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

The lady calmed down and soothingly coaxed: "It is Feng Fei indeed. Don't you have feelings for me?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart bleeding and all his passions dissipated. He realized that Zhang Quan is right after all. If she did not plan to use him as a scapegoat, why would she lower herself to his level and offer her body to him?

Only with this sacrifice can she convince him that he is her lover.

All along, Xiang Shaolong has had the highest regards for Feng Fei. Right now, his impression of her has been largely tarnished.

Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: "Why is First Mistress (Feng Fei) doing this?"

In a pleading tone, the lady lightly implored: "Can you please don't interrogate me like this? Come and give me your love."

Xiang Shaolong heaved with relief, calming down: "So it is not First Mistress but Sister Ping."

If she did not use her normal tone and voice, he may have to continue making wild guesses.

Little Ping'er has resumed her normal speaking manner. She gave a soft shrill and her lips advance once again, kissing him fervently.

Absent-mindedly satisfying her lips with his kissing expertise, Xiang Shaolong is furiously thinking about the entire situation.

Logically, Little Ping'er will be accompanying Feng Fei wherever she goes. In other words, unlike Xinyue and her fellow courtesans, she need not worry about her future when the Troupe disbands.

Right now, she has cast aside her self-respect and offered herself unconditionally to him. Though it could be partly due to true love, she may have been here on Feng Fei's orders, sacrificing herself to control and manipulate himself (Xiang Shaolong).

This belief is not without reason. Although he hasn't grasp Feng Fei's retirement conspiracy or how he will be tricked into becoming a scapegoat, Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure of one thing: Feng Fei has been lying to him all along.

It does not make any sense for Feng Fei to bet all her hopes and dreams on a stranger like him.

POK!

The fire stick has lighted the oil lamp.

Little Ping'er protested: "Uhm... Uhm..." Unable to take the sudden brightness, her shining eyes are half closed for a while before she opened them fully.

Xiang Shaolong raised his upper body once again and scrutinized this lady in front of him. Her hair is open like a fan over the pillow and he was amazed at her pristine appearance, easily matching Dong Shuzen in terms of beauty. Her attractiveness has been camouflaged by her dressing up as a boy and not applying any make up.

They were looking into each other's eyes.

Contentment and nervousness is written over Little Ping'er's face. The swirling passion in her eyes is something that Xiang Shaolong cannot fathom.

Xiang Shaolong sighed inwardly. His suspicions have been confirmed.

Lowering his head and kissing her red lips, he gently soothed: "Is this the first time you are kissing a man?"

Little Ping'er nodded in reply.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, strengthening his resolve against the teasing and caressing. He icily questioned: "Are you here on First Mistress's orders?"

Her eyes wide open, Little Ping'er was taken aback. After a while did she give a flustered reply: "Why do you say so?"

From her reaction, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew that his guess is not far from the truth.

If she had come here on her own accord and hearing this question, she would be seriously offended; she would either leave the room infuriated or face him with a wronged expression.

Her reaction only serves to betray her guilt, leading her to deny him an answer, hoping to preserve this secret.

For the past few years, Xiang Shaolong has been debating complicated issues in court. A young girl like her is far from his match.

Xiang Shaolong kept his silence and glared frostily at her.

A clear drop of tear appeared at the corner of her eye, running down her face, staining the pillow.

Little Ping'er turned her face to the side, avoiding his emotionless stare. Breaking down, she began sobbing incessantly and wailed with sorrow: "You don't like me?"

Xiang Shaolong laid down beside her, using his sleeve to dry her tears. He plainly state: "I should have known it is Sister Ping. If it were somebody else, they would have stripped naked before joining me in bed."

Little Ping'er has stopped crying and helplessly submitted: "You are truly formidable. I surrender. Happy?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart softened.

Has he been too ruthless with her?

He actually resorted to such means to deal with an innocent and naïve teenager. Moreover, she is only acting out the orders of her Mistress.

To pacify her turbulent emotions, Xiang Shaolong comforted: "You are a very good-looking lady. Why are you always dressed up as a boy?"

Little Ping'er pitifully confessed: "If I had dressed up like this all the time, the lady in your arms (I) will no longer be a virgin."

Xiang Shaolong can appreciate the hidden grief in her words. Sighing to himself, he continued: "Was your nasty behavior an act as well?"

Little Ping'er began to smile. Her eyes brimming, she revealed: "At the beginning, it was an act but eventually I got used to it. Ai! You reminded me of somebody."

Xiang Shaolong became slightly jealous and asked: "Is it your lover?"

Little Ping'er's mood took a dip. She dismissed: "You are thinking too much! I have only seen him once and his words are very direct and penetrating, exactly like you. His eyes looked as if they can see into your soul. Mistress (Feng Fei) has a deep impression of him too!"

It is Xiang Shaolong's turn to be taken aback. Knowing that she is referring to himself, he dared not probe further.

Little Ping'er professed: "I feel so comfortable being cuddled by you. So that is how it feels like between men and women. No wonder Yun Niang came looking for Mister Tan."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "Sister Ping, how young are you?"

Little Ping'er bashfully answered: "I just turned seventeen! I have been dedicating my life to Mistress (Feng Fei) since I was fifteen."

Keeping up the pressure, Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Why did Mistress ask you to do this?"

Distressed, Little Ping'er howled: "Can you stop forcing me? I am in a dilemma. Ai! What should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong supported her up to a sitting position. Putting his lips to her ears, he decided: "What should you do? Honestly tell Mistress everything that has happened and that I have seen through her scheme and quitting this damned manager position."

Finishing his last sentence, he can feel a large burden being lifted off his shoulders. This job is not well suited for a man like him and additionally, the risk of exposure is too high.

Little Ping'er was frightened: "I can't do this."

Xiang Shaolong gently caressed her alluring back and smooth neck, smiling: "Just follow my instructions exactly. You need not bother about the consequences."

Little Ping'er appears to be engrossed in his massage and dreamily asked: "How did you guess Mistress ordered me to come here?"

Xiang Shaolong candidly responded: "Because it is unlike you to do so."

Little Ping'er seemed to have transformed into a different person. She unwillingly balked: "But I do have some feelings for you."

Xiang Shaolong is not amused: "It is ONLY some feelings! Come. Be a good girl and go back to your room. I do not wish to have you under such circumstances."

Little Ping'er went 'humph' and enveloped herself into his bosom. She seductively cooed: "Mistress is correct. You are one of a kind and different from other men."

Xiang Shaolong is filled with earthly desires and can feel himself aroused once more. He was petrified and reminded himself to watch his inhibitions; otherwise, he would lose this golden opportunity to quit his job. He half-forcefully carried her in his arms, sending her to his door.

Little Ping'er turned courageous and hugged his neck with both arms, kissing him zealously.

After a brief struggle, Little Ping'er grudgingly gave him a heart-breaking look and left reluctantly.

Xiang Shaolong locked his cabin door and prevented himself from thinking any further. He soon fell into a deep sleep.

At daybreak, Xiao Yuetan came back to the room a completely satisfied man. After hearing his womanly encounter last night, he was astounded at Little Ping'er's behavior. He nodded: "It is a wise decision to leave Feng Fei's employment. Sometimes, less is more. At the end of the day, I still do not understand why is she resorting to such a scheme. Ai!"

Noticing his pale expression, Xiang Shaolong was traumatized: "What is it?"

Xiao Yuetan stammered: "Yun Niang came looking for me last night. Was she acting on Feng Fei's instructions too? Otherwise, why would Little Ping'er know about me going over to Yun Niang's room?"

Xiang Shaolong exhaled a breath of air: "Can you give your little brother (me) a break? I am as tense as a tightrope. Even if this is true, it is nothing surprising."

Xiao Yuetan did not know whether to laugh or cry. He explained: "If this is the case, Yun Niang's words become unreliable. All the information that she has given to me could be lies."

Looking outside the window, Xiang Shaolong swore: "Who cares if they are true or false. No matter what, I am quitting."

Knock Knock!

Xiao Yuetan demanded: "Who is it?"

Little Ping'er voice sounded out from the other side of the door: "Good Morning Mister Tan. Mistress (Feng Fei) is asking to see Manager Shen."

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan exchanged looks before he pushed the door open.

Little Ping'er avoided his gaze and led the way towards a long corridor.

She has resumed her disguise as a boy and has a poker face, behaving as if nothing happened last night.

Initially, Xiang Shaolong was thinking of teasing her but eventually resisted the idea, knowing that this would lead to more troubles.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is stepping into Feng Fei's bedroom on board the ship. Her bedroom is twice as big as his own room and divided into two sections. A curtain separates the two sections and one of the section is furnished like a living room.

Of course Feng Fei will not be waiting for him in bed. Right this moment, she is lying on her side on an animal skin covered long bench, with her upper body resting on a cushion. Her hair is slightly untidy as if she had just woke up and her complexion is pinkish, making her appear exceptionally desirable. When he first saw her, Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned before he finally paid his respects.

No wonder the saying goes: A beautiful woman can cause a country's downfall.

For someone as charming as her, the rich and powerful will go to extreme lengths to possess her for their own enjoyment. After all, during these ancient times, it is common for influential men to acquire a harem of concubines.

Little Ping'er closed the door and took her leave.

With a peaceful expression on her face, Feng Fei pointed to a chair beside her and invited: "Please have a seat!"

Noticing the absence of any hostility on her face, Xiang Shaolong was feeling confounded and took his seat. His nose was instantly filled with the wonderful fragrances emanating from her body.

Feng Fei beamed: "Little Ping'er is definitely not your match. Otherwise, why would she be tricked by a few simple lies from you?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so brutally honest and straightforward. He fumbled and dryly coughed twice: "Can I speak my mind?"

Feng Fei plainly state: "If you want to tell me you are quitting, you can save it!"

Xiang Shaolong could not think of anything to say to that. Confused, he vexed: "What is the point of Miss (Feng Fei) keeping me around?"

Feng Fei's eyes turned to him: "Zhang Quan came to see you yesterday; is he trying to bribe you?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly sighed: "Without my answer, you should know what he is trying to achieve. I do not understand why you allowed him to stay on when you can sack him along with Sa Li. Wouldn't things be much better without all these obstacles?"

With her shining eyes, Feng Fei gave him a smile. In a gentle voice, she dissected: "Let us settle these issues one by one. Presently, I have only two wishes. Do you want to know what they are?"

Calming down, Xiang Shaolong snapped in a deep voice: "If this is Miss's secret, you can save it!"

Feng Fei does not mind his outburst and gingerly smiled: "You are not only a unique person but an extremely strange one as well. Of all the people I have met, there are those gentlemen who do not hanker after fame or fortune. They can choose to think highly of themselves because they are born with a silver spoon in their mouths and live their lives in abundance, without worrying about food or clothing. But you are just a poorly paid carriage driver and yet you behaved like you cannot be bothered and you don't mind starving to death. Shen Liang, why don't you tell what this is all about?"

Xiang Shaolong is secretly alarmed, knowing that his anxiety to quit has exposed a loophole, drawing the suspicions of this cunning beauty. He hastily salvaged: "Ai! This is just who

I am. I will not bow down to power nor follow orders blindly like a fool. Ha! Worse to worse, I'll just starve to death. There is nothing to hold me back."

Feng Fei scrutinized him for quite some time and seemed to have made some conclusion by observing his body language. She finally insisted: "Just by looking at your sitting posture, I can tell that you are not used to working for other people. Why don't you openly tell me who you really are?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart is beating frantically, guessing that she may have seen through his masquerade and knowing that he is Xiang Shaolong but is unable to verify it. The primary reason lies in Zhang Quan hiring him from the Official Stables of Wei. This is irrefutable evidence of his identity as Shen Liang.

At present, he knows he cannot show any signs of hesitation. He frowned: "Your servant (I) has already told Mistress about my background. To be honest, I am thinking of resigning because I fear that my life will be in danger. At the beginning, I thought Mistress would be supporting me indirectly. Only last night did I realize that Mistress is made from the same mold as the other people trying to get me into trouble. Why should I still trust you?"

Feng Fei is displeased: "Who said that I am scheming against you? You have fulfilled my first wish, allowing me to compose a (Song & Dance) routine that can crush my two major opponents. Therefore, I instructed Little Ping'er to accompany you for a night, relieving your sense of

loneliness. At the same time, I am worried that you may eventually succumb to Dong Shuzen's seduction and switched loyalty to her camp. You have misunderstood my intentions."

Xiang Shaolong is afraid that he will reveal more clues about his real identity if they continue debating like that. He dared not protest any further and acknowledged: "So it is all a misunderstanding!"

Feng Fei lightly highlighted: "Of course it is a misunderstanding. Moreover, I will never force Little Ping'er to do something against her wishes. I am hoping to find a good husband for her in the process."

Xiang Shaolong recalled his lowly status and can only keep quiet.

Feng Fei simply declared: "As long as you escort me out of Lin Zi safely, I can guarantee you a generous payout and even marry Little Ping'er to you."

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: "Don't you require her services in the future?"

A hint of sadness flashed past her lovely eyes as Feng Fei lamented: "Who would want to remain a lowly servant for her entire life? Ai! You seemed to be uninterested in Little Ping'er. I really don't know what is going on in your head."

Xiang Shaolong clarified: "Sister Ping is such an attractive lady; anyone would be glad to marry her. However, my career is more important to me and having a family will only

be a liability to me. I hope Mistress can understand my position.”

Feng Fei gave him a look and grieved: “Another fool who does not recognize the brutalities of war. How about this? After accomplishing our mission, I will write you a letter of recommendation that will allow you to find work wherever you go. Regarding your future success, it will have to depend on your character and abilities.”

There is nothing Xiang Shaolong can add to her words. Pretending to be full of gratitude, he took his leave.

On his way out, he unexpectedly thought of a great idea. He recollected Xiao Yuetan faking his own death to escape from Lu Buwei. Who knows, maybe Xiao Yuetan can create a similar potion as seen in ‘Romeo and Juliet’. It is the potion Juliet consumed to fake her own death, allowing her to escape from her family.

Pondering about this, he can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel and can feel his steps becoming lighter and lighter.

CHAPTER 5

Staying Against His Will

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

HE had barely taken two steps when further up the corridor, a cabin door opened with a ‘Yeeank’ sound. In a graceful, dance-like disposition, Zhu Xiuzhen sashayed out and blocked his path. Her eyes glared at him with annoyance but yet she pleaded: “Is Manager Shen available?”

Xiang Shaolong is not that dumb to take her appearance at face value. The reason is that all these courtesans are well-trained actresses.

Although Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen did scheme against him in the past, he did not bear the slightest hatred against them now that he is more informed about the present circumstances. On the contrary, his sympathies lie with them.

At the end of the day, they are simply fighting for survival in this male dominated society. Though their methods are overbearing, they are left with no other choice.

Most unfortunately, he himself is the number one wanted man by the Eastern States. His own survival is at stake and he could not assist them even if he wanted to.

His main priority right now is to slip away and not get further involved in this problematic turmoil.

Before he can offer an answer, Zhu Xiuzhen is already pulling his sleeve, dragging him into her bedroom.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong realized that he is the critical factor in this Song & Dance Troupe internal struggle, the showdown between Team Feng Fei and Team Dong Shuzen.

Regardless of whether it is Feng Fei's retirement or Dong Shuzen usurping Feng Fei's position, both ladies will have to collaborate with him and his 'men'.

In addition, he is their bridge to the outside world.

His present role resembles a manager of an international Superstar in the 21st century or, more accurately, the manager of a girl band.

Without his cooperation, Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen are like toothless, clawless tigresses, unable to achieve anything on their own. This explains why in the past, Zhang Quan and Sa Li are able to sleep with Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen.

Unexpectedly, Feng Fei has made use of Zhang Quan and Sa Li's infighting to destroy Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen's backers, preventing them from gaining the upper hand. She then bestowed this key appointment onto him, Xiang Shaolong.

He finally understood why did Feng Fei allow Zhang Quan to continue serving in the Troup. In fact, it is a very strategic and advantageous decision.

Due to the intimate relationship between Zhang Quan and Dong Shuzen, it is very challenging for Dong Shuzen to openly seduce Xiang Shaolong. The only way out is for the two of them to work together to chase Xiang Shaolong away but that will only force Xiang Shaolong to look for Feng Fei herself for support.

If Dong Shuzen disregards Zhang Quan, the latter may submit to Feng Fei, betraying all her plans and secrets to Feng Fei.

Sa Li is Zhu Xiuzhen's backer and with him gone, she is now alone and defenceless. She has now chosen to side with Dong Shuzen and has become her pawn. However, once she finds another backer, it is possible that she will fight with Dong Shuzen once again over the succession plans of the Song & Dance Troupe.

On the side, Feng Fei, Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen may be oblivious to the knowledge that Zhang Quan has been bribed by an external party and is harbouring evil intentions.

Presently, Feng Fei has failed to bribe him with Little Ping'er, Dong Shuzhen has failed in her beauty trap and Zhang Quan cannot win him over with money, forming a stalemate.

And to think that running away was all that he ever wanted.

As all these complicated thoughts are running through his brain at the speed of light, Zhu Xiuzhen had closed the door, embraced him tightly and buried her delicate face in his bosom. She emotionally questioned: "How can you be so cold towards Xiuzhen (me)?"

Xiang Shaolong can clearly feel her curvaceous body sending him waves of temptations. In his mind, he felt like treating her with tenderness. Despite knowing that she is faking everything, he feels sorry for her.

He did not hug her in return, nor did he push her away. Standing there without any reaction, he plainly advised: "Miss Xiuzhen, there is no need to do this. Just tell me what you need and I will do it for you."

Zhu Xiuzhen raised her striking face and burst out in tears. She heart-wrenchingly cried: "I am so frightened!"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to use this tactic. His heart softened: "Miss Xiuzhen!"

Zhu Xiuzhen buried her face on his wider-than-average chest and cried even harder, wetting the front of his shirt.

Xiang Shaolong frantically comforted her, supporting her to her bed and seating her on the bed's edge. He allowed her to continue hugging his neck and being in his bosom while helping to dry her tears. Eventually, she stopped crying and wailing but she still shudders occasionally (due to the heavy crying).

He is confident that it is a fake show with true feelings.

The feelings are obviously not feelings of love, but feelings of fear about her unknown future.

Zhu Xiuzhen woefully commented: "You should know about Mistress (Feng Fei) intention to disband the Song & Dance Troupe and her plans to use us (courtesans) as gifts to secure her friendship with the rich and famous, allowing herself to leave unscathed."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Are you sure?"

Zhu Xiuzhen assured: "It is definitely the truth. In the past, there were some sisters in the Troupe who left and got married into a rich family. Their lives took a turn for the worse. There were some who are beaten to death by the first wife and some who became prostitutes of the official brothels after their Lords lost power. Those who are neglected considered themselves lucky to have not suffered a worse fate. Xiuzhen (I) will rather choose to be dead than to live such a meaningless life."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Were all of you (courtesans) bought (as a slave or servant) by Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

Zhu Xiuzhen sorrowfully nodded: "She may appear to be treating us with kindness but it is because we are of some usefulness to her, such as supporting her in winning the title of the World's Best Courtesan. In actual fact, she only makes plans for herself and we are just her tools."

Xiang Shaolong can tell that she is getting desperate, causing her to confide her insecurities in him. He laments the detestable status of womenfolk in these ancient times and that he is unable to contribute to her situation. He wondered: "You are telling me all your secrets. Aren't you concerned that I may betray you to Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

Zhu Xiuzhen bitterly smiled: "I have seen all kinds of men and you are the kind who are full of justice. I have judged you erroneously in the beginning but I will not repeat this mistake. Now, I can only cast aside my pride and beg for your assistance." She added: "We are sheltered women who knew nothing except our (Song & Dance) routines. When we leave the Troupe, we will be at a disadvantage and would likely be bullied wherever we go."

Xiang Shaolong proclaimed: "But you have to get married eventually!"

Zhu Xiuzhen raised her head, facing Xiang Shaolong with a tear-stained face. She gently mentioned: "It would be good if we need not get married. All of us (courtesans) have saved our money well and can live the rest of our lives without worrying about food or clothing. Nonetheless, we do require someone to make proper arrangements for us. Now that Sa

Li has been dismissed by Mistress (Feng Fei), I can only come to you.” In an instance, she lowered her head and insisted: “Even if I must get married, I hope my partner will not know about my past as a courtesan. Xiuzhen (I) would rather be a dedicated wife of a poor man than to become a concubine or mistress of a rich man”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden brainwave. This is the crux of the matter that he has been trying to comprehend.

Within the Song & Dance Troupe, there is the ambitious Dong Shuzen whose aim is to take over Feng Fei’s position and the unambitious ones like Zhu Xiuzhen, who only wish to lead an ordinary life from the money that she has made by performing and sleeping with the rich.

Regardless of their goals, everyone wants to be free, to be the master of their own destiny, to forge a life of happiness and independence.

For the first time ever, he is weighing his options about leaving. Even if he can flee successfully, will he bear to leave them in the lurch? The best option is to arrange for them to settle down in Qin. On one hand, they will be spared the atrocities of war and on the other hand, they will be safe under his protection.

As long as they are willing, Xiang Shaolong would have no trouble finding them a good home, given their exceptional appearances.

However, he is now fighting for his own survival, not to mention the Troupe internal bickering and Zhang Quan the

traitor. With all these weighing down on him, will he still be able to make a difference in their lives? He decided to test Zhu Xiuzhen's sincerity and warmly enquired: "Sa Li was dismissed because of me. Did you ever think taking revenge for him?"

Zhu Xiuzhen's body shivered: "No wonder you did not come to my room! You have uncovered my scheme! Xiuzhen (I) earnestly offer you my apologies. I will accept any punishment from you."

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not 'punish' her. He even made up his mind to not get involved with any girl from the Song & Dance Troupe, preventing himself from being entangled in a relationship burden.

In this moment, he pledges to do his best for these vulnerable girls of the Song & Dance Troupe, allowing each of them to live a life of liberty. In a way, he hopes this gesture will help to redeem some of sins his fellow men have accumulated.

He tactfully rejected Zhu Xiuzhen's advances and returned to his room, sharing his encounters with Xiao Yuetan.

Xiao Yuetan nodded: "Although some risks are involved, a man should overcome difficulties with courage and strength in whatever he does. Frankly speaking, I feel sorry for them as well but my resources are limited. If we can arrange for them to migrate to Xianyang (Capital City of Qin), you can use this opportunity to travel home, reuniting with your

family and they can find a safe abode. It will be two perfect endings.”

Xiang Shaolong thought hard and frowned: “But Feng Fei has her own plans and she will not be sharing them with us.”

Xiao Yuetan assured: “She is quite dependent on you and therefore, you must be playing a crucial role in her grand plan. You can simply follow her plan and gather clues in the meantime. Our main priority now is for you to start familiarizing yourself with different members of the Troupe. When you are able to command them like commanding an army for war, you can accomplish your duties more easily.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned: “Sa Li’s supporters have now pledged their allegiance to Zhang Quan. Most of the troupe members appear to be respectful but in reality, they are hostile and cannot wait to witness my downfall. This is my biggest challenge now. It is impossible to win their trust in such a short space of time.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed: “Zhang Quan is just a clown and hardly a threat to us. All I need is to give the command and he will disappear from our lives forever. Nevertheless, we should find out who is the main perpetrator. Only when we understand our enemy fully can we have a chance at victory.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Unless we resort to torturing him, he may not divulge his employer’s identity.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed: “In terms of scheming, your elder brother (me) is way better than you. Using torture is an

inferior strategy, potentially causing him to give us false names, which we have no way of verifying. Ha! I have a more sensational plan where we can get rid of Zhang Quan and win the hearts of the people at the same time.” He leaned towards Xiang Shaolong’s ear and began whispering.

After listening to his suggestion, Xiang Shaolong praised: “Luckily we were best friends from the very beginning. Otherwise, I would have lost to Lu Buwei a long time ago.”

A heavy snow descended from the skies after lunch.

The fleet of ships is about twenty sailing hours away from Lin Zi. They will arrive in this Qi melting pot of different arts and culture tomorrow morning.

With his new mindset, Xiang Shaolong tried his best to understand the affairs of the Song & Dance Troupe. Flipping through the past accounts, he came to realize that besides receiving substantial remunerations for their performances, the valuables presented by the rich and powerful are enough to fill more than forty chests.

Whoever marrying Feng Fei is equivalent to inheriting this astronomical amount of wealth and treasure. It is gaining both money and beauty in one swoop.

He has his doubts about Zhang Quan’s theory of Feng Fei and her secret admirer. Perhaps Zhang Quan hopes to be lucky man himself! When Feng Fei went to rehearse her (Song & Dance) routine after dinner, Xiang Shaolong used this opportunity to initiate a visit to Zhang Quan.

Zhang Quan was elated to see him coming and exclaimed: "I was about to pay you a visit."

After sitting down and receiving a cup of tea from Zhang Quan, Xiang Shaolong muttered: "Mistress (Feng Fei) summoned me this morning, promising to reward me with 100 ingots of gold and an official appointment in Qi. Honestly speaking, everyone is after fame and fortune. Now that Mistress is going to promote me in Qi, if Brother Zhang is in my shoes, would you reject such an offer?"

His face turning slightly pale, Zhang Quan guaranteed after some consideration: "The mastermind employing me is known for his wealth and his net worth is much more than Feng Fei's. Nonetheless, I must seek his permission before I can formally endorse a matching offer for you. I am confident I can secure at least 150 ingots of gold."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that unless the person is from Qi, he would be one of the dignitaries visiting Lin Zi for the birthday celebrations (of King of Qi). Otherwise, Zhang Quan will not be able to report to him with such convenience.

Unsatisfied with just this intelligence, he shook his head: "Brother Zhang need not go to the extent! Money may be important but holding an official position has always been my dream. Mistress (Feng Fei) is on good terms with many influential individuals. Everyone will have to grant her some allowances."

Zhang Quan interrupted: "Brother Shen is a wise man. When we are discussing prominent characters, the topic will ultimately conclude that Qin has the most of such talents. My employer is a powerhouse in Qin. If Brother Shen wants to gain official appointment, you can join me in submitting to him. Otherwise, you may not enjoy your official appointment for long before you become the citizen of a conquered state."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart thumping wildly, for this Mastermind could well be Lu Buwei.

Based on Lu Buwei's lustful and possessive personality, coupled with Feng Fei's previous visit to Xianyang, it is not unlikely that she has drawn his attention.

With his wealth and authority, bribing someone like Zhang Quan is as easy as ABC.

As Lu Buwei is on his way to Lin Zi and matching with Zhang Quan's description, Xiang Shaolong construed that his invisible opponent is none other than Lu Buwei.

Treacherous and merciless are the two best words to describe him.

But with Tian Dan's support, it will not be easy to trounce him.

Faking disbelief, he pondered: "Who can it be?"

Zhang Quan sighed: "I would tell you if I can. But if I, Zhang Quan, told you any lies, may I die a horrible death. Brother Shen can put your mind at ease!"

Xiang Shaolong probed: "A cunning rabbit is killed; A traitor is beheaded. If he went back on his words after obtaining Mistress (Feng Fei), Brother Zhang and I would not only failed to receive any benefits but may even have to forfeit our lives."

Zhang Quan disagreed: "Your description is very heartrending but you can rest assured that we will not be played out. This man is famous for the countless family warriors he hosts at his residence. He appreciates talent much more than your old employer Prince Wuji. There are numerous scholars and heroes he recruited all over the land. I am sure there is a place for you in his residence. Brother Shen can trust my judgment."

Xiang Shaolong insisted: "This is only based on Brother Zhang's opinion. How about this! Get him to pay me half of my reward as a deposit. I will only cooperate with Brother Zhang when I see my money."

Zhang Quan was relieved: "This should not be a problem. However, let me warn you in advance. In the event that Brother Shen took his money and yet failed to fulfill your obligations, you can forget about leaving Lin Zi alive."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "A gentleman's word is his bond. Fortunately, I did not agree to Mistress (Feng Fei) terms immediately and used a delaying tactic."

Zhang Quan was delighted: "This is wonderful. Brother Shen should try to get closer to Mistress and find out who are her allies or who is her mystery man. When I report to my

employer, at least I have some results to show him and it will be easier to ask for your deposit money.”

Xiang Shaolong firmly state: “I will naturally tell you everything I know once I see my money. Brother Zhang should know me by now. This deal is cash on delivery.”

Zhang Quan could not negotiate further and nodded in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong was humoured. Having come all the way to Qi, he is still locking horns with Lu Buwei.

Xiao Yuetan will be overjoyed if he knows about this.

Both of them are well versed with Lu Buwei character and schemes. They are in a superior position because they understand their enemy well, as mentioned in Sun Zi’s Art of War.

Lu Buwei, on the other hand, knows nothing about them. Even with Tian Dan’s partnership, he may not gain the upper hand.

Moreover, Tian Dan himself is intertwined in a power tussle within his own state. (the crown prince selection) With the prized Feng Fei at the centre of another skirmish, Xiao Yuetan and himself can make excellent use of the circumstances to create plenty of chaos, eventually beating Lu Buwei soundly for good measure.

Relishing these thoughts, he cannot be bothered with Zhang Quan anymore and took his leave.

Outside his room, he had barely taken a few steps when someone called out his name from behind. It turned out to be Little Ping'er glaring coldly at him.

Xiang Shaolong stopped walking. Little Ping'er came to his front and interrogated in a harsh manner: "Did you just come out of Zhang Quan's room?"

Xiang Shaolong can only nod his head.

Little Ping'er blew her top: "What tricks are you up to? Are you thinking of betraying Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

From her expression, Xiang Shaolong predicted that Feng Fei has told Little Ping'er about his stand (on not wanting to marry Little Ping'er), causing her extensive suffering. It is better not to give her false hopes anyway so Xiang Shaolong allowed her to vent her frustrations. He whispered: "Do I look like such a person? This is not a good place to talk. Is Sister Ping looking for me?"

Her two eyes reddening on the spot, Little Ping'er stomped her feet: "Who wants to look for a heartless beast like you? It is Mistress (Feng Fei) looking for you."

His heart softening, Xiang Shaolong explained in gentle tone: "Can you please listen to me? I... .."

Covering her ears with both hands, Little Ping'er cried: "I don't want to hear anything from you." Before her sentence is completed, tears of emotion are flowing out of her eyes. She left crying.

Xiang Shaolong can only shake his head and give a bitter smile.

Since he must be heartless to her, he might as well make it the first and only time.

He really cannot afford the implications of love.

Isn't Feng Fei busy rehearsing? Why is she looking for him?

CHAPTER 6

A Fight To The End

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THERE are several major changes to Feng Fei's 'The Immortal Phoenix Arising', showcasing a moving storyline with stages upon stages of spellbinding dances. Feng Fei had just composed an excellent opening song sang together by all the courtesans, singing about the Immortals in the Heaven Realm and the humans having a celebration on the Human Realm.

Feng Fei's talent in the Song & Dance industry is without a doubt and her only concern is lack of inspiration. With Xiang

Shaolong lighting a spark of creativity, the overflowing of ideas that followed resembles the bursting of a river dam. Presently, she has an abundance of materials to work on and there is no looking back.

As Xiang Shaolong was cheering and clapping with the other serving maids, Feng Fei came to his side with her eyes glimmering. She joyfully enquired: "Shen Liang, is it much better now?"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely praised: "Mistress's performance is like a magical journey, with the main concept delicately inserted multiple times into the routine, just like a master weaving cotton. This results in a dazzling and attention grabbing sequence. If Mistress were to add your singing to the finale, even the stubborn rocks will bow."

An indescribable pleasure flashed across Feng Fei's lovely eyes. For the first time ever, she held the corner of his sleeve, pulling him to a corner far away from the crowd. She gestured to Dong Shuzhen and her fellow courtesans, instructing them to continue the rehearsal before emotionally sighing: "Feng Fei (I) has never heard such a moving portrayal about my production. Ai, will the stubborn rocks really bow when they are impressed? This is the greatest glory a singer can ever receive. Shen Liang ah! What should I do with you?"

Xiang Shaolong cursed himself for stealing the limelight again, repeating his past deed of using the phrase 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' to win the affections of Talented

Lady Ji. He has inadvertently made inroads into Feng Fei's heart. However, this proves that Zhang Quan's theory is correct.

If Feng Fei did not have a secret lover, she would not have sigh and fall into a dilemma. He naturally would not snatch her away from her lover and has no desire to get involved with this peerless beauty, despite having feelings for her. He humbly admitted: "My own creative mood has been unleashed after watching Mistress's performance, causing me to come up with these proverbs."

Feng Fei stared deeply into his eyes, her shoulder slightly touching his and began chirping like a little girl: "My main song is almost completed save for a few amendments. Heaven has really been kind to me, allowing me to meet a bosom friend like you before my retirement."

Using this opening, Xiang Shaolong began: "If Mistress can place all her trust and share all her secrets with me, I, Shen Liang, can guarantee with my life that Mistress will have all her dreams come true."

Feng Fei was taken aback: "Are you implying that I am hiding information from you?"

If Xiang Shaolong do not display some might, it will be impossible to force her to succumb. His eyes shimmering with deathly cold rays, his stare pierce straight into her enthralling eyes as he hissed: "Does Mistress know who is the perpetrator behind Zhang Quan?"

Feng Fei cannot bear to look at him and lowered her eyes, replying: "Isn't it Suzhen?"

Xiang Shaolong icily laughed: "Second Mistress is just another pathetic victim fighting for her own survival."

Feng Fei is offended: "What are you talking about?"

Facing Xiang Shaolong for a moment, she lowered her glance again and pleaded: "Can you stop staring at me?"

Xiang Shaolong is feeling wonderful, knowing that she will no longer be able to control him like before. He pressed on: "Zhang Quan is now serving Lu Buwei."

Her face losing colour, Feng Fei exclaimed: "What?"

Xiang Shaolong repeated: "Mistress is now in grave danger. Lu Buwei is on intimate terms with the people of Qi and with the power he wields in Qin, there is hardly anyone who would dare to offend him. If he wishes to obtain Mistress, it is not an unachievable task."

Appearing to have lost her self-control after hearing the name of the man and his evil doings, Feng Fei grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and gasped: "What should we do? Why don't I sack Zhang Quan immediately!"

With her petite hand pulling his own shoulder, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart melting. Preventing other feelings from arising, he seriously articulated: "Mistress needs to make a choice. One, you put your complete trust in me. Two, you let me go. If you are indecisive, the consequences will be unimaginable. For example, Lu Buwei

can send him men to take Mistress away by force and at the same time, announce to the world that you have decided to retire and marry into his family. I doubt there will be anyone who will contest his words or even raise an objection. Mistress should know better than me that once you have spent a single night in his custody, your future will be gone.”

Feng Fei was at a loss: “Do you have a plan to counter him?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I will make use of Zhang Quan to convey a false message to Lu Buwei that Mistress’s lover is someone that even he (Lu Buwei) cannot afford to antagonize. Thus, he can only wait for you to leave before launching a covert attack, buying us more time.”

Feng Fei heaved a sigh of relief and scrutinized him with suspicion before muttering: “You are really formidable and do not fear Lu Buwei one bit. You even speak like you are very familiar with his methods. Ai, without you, there will be no one else I can depend on.”

Xiang Shaolong realized that she had gathered her wits and apparently decided: “Mistress is only depending on me but has yet to trust me. Since I am unable to secure your confidence, I, Shen Liang, will depart tomorrow morning once we arrive in Lin Zi. I do not wish to die a meaningless death.”

Feng Fei glanced at him with confusion for some time before submitting: “The more I get to know you, the more I realize that you are not as simple as you look. Fine. Let’s talk in my room.”

Xiang Shaolong was jubilant. Using a combination of hard and soft tactics to keep up the pressure, this beauty has finally made concessions.

Feng Fei sat down by his side with a kind expression. She gently inquired: "What do you want me to tell you?"

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Since Mistress has the courage to go to Lin Zi, there must be someone guaranteeing your safety. Who is this person?"

Feng Fei delayed: "There is indeed such a person. Can I reveal his identity at a more suitable time in the future?"

Xiang Shaolong does not want to push his luck and nodded: "Fine. After the disbandment of the Song & Dance Troupe, may I ask what are Mistress's plans for the other courtesans and where is Mistress intending to retire to?"

Showing signs of hesitation, Feng Fei lightly exhaled: "I have made appropriate plans for them. Can Manager Shen not interfere in these matters?"

Xiang Shaolong was irritated: "How can I ignore this matter? Right now, all the courtesans are feeling restless precisely because they are worried about their future. I, Shen Liang, may be down and out but my fighting spirit has not deserted me. I will not allow Mistress to destroy their (courtesans) future."

The captivating eyes of Feng Fei flashed with anger before calming down. She dolefully justified: "We are all forced by circumstances and some things cannot be prevented. If that

lass Dong Shuzen did not leak the news of my retirement, there would not be so many complicated matters right now.”

Xiang Shaolong clarified: “I believed you have misunderstood Second Mistress. Based on my analysis, it is probably Zhang Quan who leaked this information to Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei intentionally broadcasted this news, thereby creating the conditions for him to openly seize you for his own gratification.”

Feng Fei appeared to be deep in thought. Subsequently, she insisted with determination: “But I have already given my word to somebody about the future of Dong Shuzen and the courtesans. This cannot be changed. Moreover, this person is someone I dare not offend.”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: “There is nothing in the world that cannot be changed. Putting this aside for the time being, Mistress has yet to answer my question.”

Feng Fei whined: “Must I really answer you? As long as you bring me out of Lin Zi without anyone’s knowledge, there will be a person to receive me and you can walk away a free man. On top of that, you will be handsomely rewarded and need not worry about money for the rest of your life.”

Flapping his sleeve, Xiang Shaolong stood up: “At the end of the day, you are still unwilling to trust me. I know Tian Dan is somewhat involved and he must be the same person who is supposed to guarantee your safety. That explains your earlier anxiety and why you are treating me with such

kindness! Forget it! From this moment on, we have nothing to do with each other.”

Feng Fei was utterly shocked and in a moment of fear, she hugged him and wailed: “There is nothing I can hide from you. Heavens, what kind of person are you? Pray take your seat again and let us discuss this further.”

Xiang Shaolong scorned: “This is just a simple assumption. Since you have someone in Lin Zi guaranteeing your safety, why do you need Shen Liang (me) around?”

Feng Fei placed her exquisite face against his wide chest and gave a flustered response: “You are able to make a correct guess because you are aware of the friendship between Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. Ai, if not for Lu Buwei personally telling me that Tian Dan will guarantee my safety, I would not have made this trip to Lin Zi. I did not expect Lu Buwei to harbor such hideous motives.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “You must not forget that I have served both Great General Lian (Po) and Prince Wuji. Of course I will know about Lu Buwei and Tian Dan’s partnership. Both of them are lustful perverts while the ladies in the Song & Dance Troupe are all rare beauties; how can they not bear malicious intentions? Even if your safety is guaranteed by someone else, unless he is your lover, it will probably be another trap.”

Feng Fei’s world came crashing down and she is using all her strength to hug him tightly. She mourned: “What should I do?”

Ever since she discovered that Zhang Quan is working for Lu Buwei, her normal confidence and calmness have vanished into thin air. Xiang Shaolong lent his support to her and simply questioned: "First of all, you must tell me the truth. Besides Lu Buwei, is there anyone else who is interested in you?"

An embarrassed Feng Fei straightened her posture in front of him. With a complicated look in her eyes, she confessed: "It is obviously someone with considerable standing. On this trip to Qi, the cause of my greatest worry is Zongsun Long. He does not hold any official appointment but his influence in Qi is not below Tian Dan. The talented men serving him are immeasurable and he supports the Second Prince Tian Jian. He is at loggerheads with Tian Dan who supports the First Prince Tian Sheng. When I was in Daliang (Wei Capital), he came all the way to look for me but was harshly rebuffed by myself. Disillusioned, he took his leave and swore an oath that since he is unable to lay his hands on me, others can forget about doing the same."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Are you referring to that bloodthirsty loan shark?"

Feng Fei is no longer surprised at his wealth of knowledge. She nodded: "That is the man. It is rumoured that his net worth has exceeded that of Wu Shijie and he has spies, followers and debtors in every state. Now you can understand the reason for my uneasiness."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed: "And who is the man unafraid of Zongsun Long?"

Feng Fei whispered: "He is Han Chuang. You should have heard of his name!"

Xiang Shaolong rolled his eyes: "Han Chuang?"

Feng Fei was astonished: "You know him personally?"

Xiang Shaolong lied: "I have heard of this person but did not expect it to be him. This man is famous for his lust. How you can trust a man like that?"

Feng Fei divulged: "He may hanker after pleasures of the flesh but he is quite a nice person. Since we are talking about him, I might as well tell you everything! I have pledged to reward him with Dong Shuzen and the courtesans, as a form of thanking him for his aid. There, I have told you everything."

Xiang Shaolong prompted: "There is just one more thing. Who is Mistress's secret lover?"

Feng Fei contemplated for some time before she suddenly embraced him around his shoulder and waist, gently demanding: "I can tell you who he is but you must swear not to tell anyone else."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and forcefully held back his own desire to embrace her in return. He proceeded to give his word and Feng Fei dreamily disclosed: "This man is famous beyond words. Recently, he created plenty of trouble for the Six Eastern States."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head becoming numb. Could it be that Feng Fei is in love with himself? Is she heading to Qin to find him after disbanding the Troupe? Feng Fei announced: "He is Xiang Shaolong, the most feared man amongst the Six Eastern States."

Despite expecting her to mention his own name, Xiang Shaolong could not help but shuddered: "Does he love you?"

Feng Fei raised her face and look at him, astounded: "What are you asking such a strange question?"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that she is still keeping this secret from him and is just using another name to satisfy his curiosity. His mind evaluating her words like a super computer, he is confident that her secret lover cannot be himself. Otherwise, Dan Meimei would have told him so.

At the same time, he concluded that this person is from Qin. All he has to do is to escort her back to Xianyang and she can reunite with her lover. He joked: "In this case, I will have to deliver you to Zhongmou."

In his mind, he could understand her reason for keeping this an absolute secret. If the mystery man's identity is exposed, Lu Buwei will surely kill him. Recalling the time at Drunken Wind Brothel when she was supposed to assassinate himself but subsequently changed her mind, it could be due to her newfound love with this man. This could be the same reason behind her desire to retire and settle down. As anticipated, Feng Fei objected: "No! He has given instructions for me to

wait for him in Xianyang. All you need to do is to send me to Xianyang.”

Enraged, Xiang Shaolong locked Feng Fei in a bear hug and wildly kissed her with a vengeance. Feng Fei put up a fierce struggle but eventually capitulated to his warm lips. There were signs of resistance but she ultimately accepted this invasion. Breaking the kiss, he scanned her perfect complexion and well-defined features before elaborating: “This is me punishing Mistress for withholding information from me. You can hate me all you like but presently, only I, Shen Liang, am able to prevent you from being Zongsun Long’s prisoner. Except for me, anybody else would have a hidden agenda for helping you.”

Feng Fei’s shapely body turned into jelly and collapsed into his bosom: “Don’t you have a hidden agenda too?”

Since she did not deny lying to him, Xiang Shaolong retained his goodwill towards her. Putting his arms around her shoulder, he advised: “If I had come to you with ill intentions, I can easily force myself on you, taking Mistress’s precious chastity right now. Think about it!” Finishing his words, he strode off.

Although he is unable to explain it, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart brimming with happiness. Ever since Li Mu beat him to a pulp and causing him to lead a fugitive life, all his accumulated frustration has been released in that one long kiss. He can feel his fighting spirit soaring, reminding him of the time he disguised himself as Dong Horse Fanatic, and

heading to Handan City to capture Zhao Mu. The only difference is that besides Xiao Yuetan aiding him, he can only depend on the sword hanging around his waist. He may have to hide his sword as someone may identify him through it. In this moment, he made up his mind to indulge in another round with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. No matter what, he must do his best to liberate these oppressed ladies. This is his way of giving back to society.

CHAPTER 7

Ancient Capital Lin Zi

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE FOUNDING King of Qi is Lu Shang. After King Zhouwu annihilated the Zhou Dynasty and set up Western Zhou, he assigned Lu Shang to Qi and bestowed him the position of Protector Jiang. He built the capital named Yin Qiu but was later renamed Lin Zi.

Surviving through the periods of Western and Eastern Zhou dynasties, Qi remains a vast country with flourishing commerce, coupled with lucrative fishing and salt trade. It is a strong and prosperous nation.

Qi has been a dominant force during the Spring & Autumn Period, mainly due to the efforts of King Qi Henggong and his Premier Guan Zhong. Together, they introduced a set of reforms that strengthened the country significantly. The wealth and growth of the nation is comparable to the Golden Age of Qin. The country is doing well by all accounts and can be considered a superpower.

Another crucial factor is the conquest of the Laiyi Tribe residing at its borders.

As early as when the Protector is conducting his nation building, the Laiyi Tribe, which shares the sea border with Qi, began to launch aggressive attacks. The hostility continued on and off for several years until Qi officially routed them in 567 BC.

Not only did Qi finally rid itself of a persistent thorn in its flesh, the country's land occupation increased by more than 50%. In addition, it now owns the entire sea border, compared to owning half of it previously.

The people of Qi are known tyrants and constantly harassed the nearby State of Lu and conquer smaller surrounding States. Using the Alliance of Zhaoling, it even managed to wrest control of the State of Zheng from the powerful Chu. Chu is located at the south of Qi.

Due to the alliance and with Qi in the way, Chu is unable to expand northwards and focused their armies on expanding their territory southeast. Qi can only watch on helplessly.

The Alliance of Zhaoling signals the peak of Qi's military expeditions. In the same breath, it signifies the crowning glory of Qi Heng Gong and Guan Zhong's career.

After their two deaths, the authority of Qi descended into a power tussle between five princes. Without a commanding figure, it is now the time for the other States to showcase their might.

During the period of the Warring States, Qi got General Sun Bin to attack Wei in an attempt to save Zhao from Wei's armies. The invasion was a success and soon, the Qi army has reach Daliang. The next year, the army of Wei was soundly defeated by the army of Qi at Maling. From then on, Qi has replaced Wei as the leading state of eastern China and the States of Wei, Zhao and Han pays tribute to Qi.

With newfound ambition and taking advantage of Yan's internal strife, Qi invaded Yan and occupied the capital of Yan for three years before recalling their armies.

King Qi Xuan arrogantly proclaimed: "One superpower against another, tasting victory in 5 days." It is truly a feat that even the powerful Qin has yet to accomplished.

Chu declined in strength and Sanjing was broken up, resulting in Qi and Qin becoming the two strongest states in China. Qi is in the east and Qin is in the west.

Just when Qi was tasting every success and occupying countless new territories, they realized that war had emptied their treasury. Bearing intense hatred for Qi, Yan

made use of this golden opportunity to launch a joint attack with Qin, Chu, Wei, Zhao and Han.

Yan General Yue Yi overran Lin Zi and repeated the atrocities Qi inflicted in the capital of Yan thirty years ago. Every single piece of valuable, treasure, carriage or weapon is not spared from plundering. If not for Tian Dan turning the tide and defeating the army of Yan, Lin Zi will be burnt to the ground.

Nevertheless, much of Qi has been pillaged or destroyed, and the country is once again in decline.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived in Lin Zi, another thirty years have come and gone. In a similar fashion, Tian Dan has declined from the powerhouse he once was to his twilight years where he faces challenges to his authority.

The City of Lin Zi was built along the west shore of River Zi and is actually two cities linked together, namely Big City and Small City. The total surface area of the Big City and the Small City is approximately sixty square miles.

Within the city, the buildings are grand and imposing. The Qi Palace is situated at the north of the Small City and all major roads are constructed with the palace as a central guideline. The monasteries of Qi and residences of officials are within proximity of the palace. The two sides of the roads are lined with ancient tall trees but their branches are covered with icicles due to the harsh weather.

Although it had suffered the carnages of war, Lin Zi has recovered speedily to become a lively civilization. The city is well populated and the economy is thriving.

As the fleet of ships docked at the east of the city, all the noteworthy officials and men of importance had gathered around, welcoming the world famous courtesan Feng Fei.

A waiting military band began to conjure a friendly tune as Feng Fei elegantly came ashore with Little Ping'er supporting her. Her curvaceous figure, graceful walking style and delicate features left the audience awe-struck.

Following behind Feng Fei are Dong Shuzen and the twelve courtesans, causing everyone to stare at them without blinking.

Xiang Shaolong had identified Tian Dan among the welcoming party and quickly mingled among the family warriors, making it harder to be identified by Tian Dan's sharp observation skills.

In reality, the likelihood of being spotted is not high.

As directed by Xiao Yuetan, he is wearing a worker's shirt with a woolen lamb fur jacket on the outside. Below his shirt, he is wearing a cloth belt in order to conceal his muscular waist and at the same time, create a fake potbelly.

Standing on the pier, Tian Dan, as well as the rich and powerful residents of Qi, was all dressed either in deer fur coats or fox fur coats. A shirt is worn outside the coat, covering the animal fur, enhancing the exquisiteness of their appearances.

Humans are judged firstly by their external looks. By simply downplaying his dressing, Xiang Shaolong is not as prominent looking as before.

Under Xiao Yuetan's skillful hands, his facial complexion has darkened and is easily mistaken for a man ten years his senior. The effect is so startling that when looking at his own reflection in a bronze mirror, even Xiang Shaolong cannot believe the difference between his current look and his previously handsome looks.

Xiao Yuetan and Feng Fei are the first batch of people to disembark the ship and were exchanging pleasantries with the welcoming party.

As the sky is still snowing, Feng Fei climbed into her carriage immediately and entered the city under the escort of the Qi soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong dared not ride a horse and sneaked into Xiao Yuetan's carriage, admiring: "You seemed to be highly respected in Qi."

Xiao Yuetan humbly begged his pardon before commenting: "We are the prepared (ones) observing the unprepared (ones). I paid extra attention to Tian Dan and except for Feng Fei, he did not bother to look anyone else. Ai! Comparing his looks from the last time I saw him, he seemed to have aged a lot."

The carriage is moving in a huge convoy, entering the city in an unhurried manner.

Xiao Yuetan educated: “The Big City has 8 city gates. The two horizontal roads going from the east to the west are named Great Eastern Way and Great Western Way, while the two vertical roads running from the north to the south are named Great Southern Way and Great Northern Way. It is rather easy to remember.”

Peering out of the carriage window, Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Like it or not, I am finally here in Lin Zi; let’s pray I can leave here in one piece!

With a strong wind and snow blowing through the city, there are only a handful of pedestrians. The pedestrians are walking briskly and gazed at the convoy with curiosity.

Xiao Yuetan suggested: “At the intersection of the four Great Ways, there is a district known as ‘Little Lin Zi’. It is the most vibrant and dynamic locality, a must see for all travellers. I will bring you there tonight and join in the festivities!

Xiang Shaolong objected: “Shouldn’t I avoid taking on such a high profile?”

Xiao Yuetan counseled: “The more you try to hide, the more attention you will draw to yourself. Even if you do not provoke the suspicions of outsiders, you will trigger the doubts of Zhang Quan and his men eventually.”

Xiang Shaolong can only agree: “As per your guidance!”

Ever since he learnt that Lu Buwei is Zhang Quan’s mastermind, Xiao Yuetan is on cloud 9. Currently, he is still basking with joy. Pointing to a gigantic mansion along the

journey, he articulated: “These are the residences of the wealthy citizens, with multiple courtyards, tiled roofs and whitewashed walls. Compared to the single courtyard houses along the streets for the common folks, it is a world of difference.”

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at his surroundings, discovering that they are now travelling on Great Eastern Way. The road is 7 metres wide, allowing up to 4 carriages to travel side by side. Both sides of the road are lined with shops.

There are lanes intersecting the main road where the ordinary locals reside. The lanes made of common materials and are only meant for walking.

The network of roads in Lin Zi is well organized and the city is littered with high walls and huge mansions. The façade of the buildings are very well maintained, in order to live up to the reputation as the Capital of Qi.

Xiang Shaolong abruptly felt that this is a worthwhile trip.

Xiao Yuetan pointed out: “Little Lin Zi has the highest concentration of businesses and you can buy whatever your heart desires. The fortune tellers there are well-known among all the States.”

Because of the description ‘Well-known among all the States’, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of Qixia Sword Saint Cao Quidao. He inquired: “Where is Qixia College (I am changing from school to college)?”

Xiao Yuetan gladly imparted: "It is located at the west of the city, beyond Qi gate. It is an impressive, lofty and spectacular structure. All the teachers who teaches there are specially titled: Qixia Tutor and the students are termed: Qixia Mates. They numbered a few thousand."

Pausing, he continued: "I have had the honour of being invited there to lecture on music and healing. Thus, I enjoy the respect equivalent of a Marquis."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "I wondered if Zou Yan has arrived?"

Xiao Yuetan frowned: "I am not sure about that."

Recalling Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong had the inclination to seek her.

Xiao Yuetan added: "Being a Qixia Tutor is quite a feat. Nevertheless, there are outstanding individuals who are conferred a Professorship. They are the only ones who can debate politics besides the Qi Court. Zou Yan is one of them. I can easily enquire about his whereabouts."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "What kind of man is Cao Quidao?"

His eyes emanating with respect, Xiao Yuetan whispered: "His prestige in Qi unmatched and he is the Master-Mentor of the King of Qi. Members of the royal family and officials have to kowtow to him whenever they run into him. He resides alone in a small hut outside Qixia College, leading a simple life. He should be reaching fifty years of age but

resembles a thirty-year-old man instead. He does not grant audiences easily.”

Xiang Shaolong originally wanted to trace Shan Rou’s dwellings from him but after hearing these words, he gave up the idea.

Xiao Yuetan continued: “His sword skills have become legendary and due to a lack of challengers, he only participated in a few duels in the recent years.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Did he used to have many challengers?”

Xiao Yuetan responded: “Whoever defeats him will succeed him as the prestigious Qixia’s Sword Saint and his name will be known to the world. However, his sword shows no mercy and his challengers usually end up dead or seriously injured. As a result, at the present moment, no one dares to challenge him.”

If he still possess his Hundred Battle Sabre and can reveal his true identity, Xiang Shaolong would loved to pitch his skills against Cao Quidao’s sword, desiring to know the level of his accomplishment. He is naturally looking at a friendly competition and not a life and death duel.

At this moment, the convoy has entered a VIP guesthouse along Great Eastern Way. They were assigned to Tingsong Villa, one of the sixteen Villas used to accommodate visiting dignitaries and distinguished guests.

Conscious that it is time for him to get to work, he swiftly scampered off the carriage and with Zhang Quan by his side, he liaise with the Villa Manager, allocating the rooms and storage of resources. By the time everything has been taken care of, half a day has gone by. It is now time for Feng Fei to enter the palace for a dinner banquet.

Tian Dan personally came to escort Feng Fei and Xiao Yuetan was Feng Fei's dining companion.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally came out to supervise matters, opening facing Tian Dan as well as his two bodyguards, the brothers, Liu Zhongxia and Liu Zhongshi. None of them were interested in this 'lowly servant'.

After sending Feng Fei off, Xiang Shaolong is exhilarated. If even someone as sharp as Tian Dan has failed to see though his disguise, he is confident he can fool the rest of the crowd.

After consuming their dinner, Dong Shuzen and the courtesans began rehearsing their Song & Dance routine as instructed by Feng Fei while Xiang Shaolong headed to the eastern wing to look for Zhang Quan. Once the door has been closed, he proclaimed: "I have gained valuable intelligence about Feng Fei. If Brother Zhang can fork out the deposit now, I will report my findings to you."

Zhang Quan was thrilled: "Well done! However, my employer hasn't arrived in Lin Zi. I can only pay you the deposit two days later. Can Brother Shen prematurely share with me some of your discoveries?"

Xiang Shaolong acted mysterious: "She has someone in Qi who is guaranteeing her safety and he is none other than Tian Dan. Earlier on, Tian Dan was the man escorting her to the banquet. This man wields great authority in Qi and is not someone to be trifled with."

Zhang Quan knew the answer all along and is using this to test his allegiance. He wasn't affected by this revelation and simply replied: "I have my ways of dealing with him. He is not a threat."

Looking at his phony act of arrogance, Xiang Shaolong was amused and added: "However, our employer's opponent is not limited to Tian Dan alone. We have another formidable foe and his name is Zongsun Long. Has Brother Zhang heard of this man before?"

His face changing colour, Zhang Quan stammered: "What?"

Xiang Shaolong exaggerated: "Mistress confided in me personally about this man. Brother Zhang should know that in Daliang, Zongsun Long did approach her and asked for her hand in marriage. After he was rejected, he swore to use every means possible to seize her for himself."

Zhang Quan obviously knew about this matter and will not question the authenticity of Xiang Shaolong's findings. He had a big frown and decided: "This piece of information is extremely important and must be made known to my employer as early as possible. Otherwise, we may be caught by surprise."

He exhaled a breath of cool air: "This man is a bloodthirsty loan shark. His methods are devious and merciless; even the rich and the powerful dare not offend him. His greatest strength lies in the countless talented men serving him. He will be a force to reckon with."

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily distracted as he recalled how he overcome Feng Fei's resistance and enjoyed a long kiss with her last night. He can feel his loins stirring and quickly corrected his emotions.

Quietly contemplating for some time, Zhang Quan probed: "Brother Shen Liang, you are truly capable to gather all these critical information in such a short span of time. Have you determined who is Mistress's secret lover?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "I trust Brother Zhang and therefore, I have revealed a few discoveries to you. Regarding the other secrets, Brother Zhang should know what I want. Forgive me for withholding my tongue."

There is nothing Zhang Quan can do to him. He sighed: "We must cooperate fully with each other. Otherwise, not only will we fail in our mission, we will die without a complete corpse. Ai! I would rather offend the King of Qi than offend Zongsun Long."

Suddenly, the sound of knocking can be heard.

Opening his door for a look, Zhang Quan found himself facing more than ten family warriors and drivers. They are asking to see Manager Shen.

Their leader is Xiang Shaolong's ex roommate, the primate-looking young chap Lei Yun'er. To Xiang Shaolong who has just come to the door, Lei Yun'er pleaded: "We are very bored here and would like to go for a walk outside. Would Manager please give his permission?"

Looking at their eager expressions, Xiang Shaolong knows that he will incur their wrath if he does not approve their requests. He smiled: "I will not stand in your way but please remember to behave yourself and come back before dawn."

The crowd went hysterical and cheerfully left.

Beside him, Zhang Quan advised: "Why did you allow them to go out? Zongsun Long is watching our every move. In a fit of anger, he may vent his frustrations on them."

Xiang Shaolong disagreed: "It is unreasonable to live every second of our lives in fear of the unexpected. I believe Zongsun Long will not create any trouble before Mistress (Feng Fei) has completed her two performances. No matter what, he has to give face to the Tian Dan and the King of Qi!"

Zhang Quan disagreed: "Qi Xiang King is getting muddle-headed in his old age. He has appointed his eldest son Tian Sheng as the Crown Prince but stripped him of his title over an insignificant matter, causing everyone to feel uneasy. Currently, Zongsun Long is going out all to promote Second Prince Tian Jian to become the Crown Prince, clashing head-on with Tian Dan. It is Tian Dan's idea to invite the three world-famous Courtesans, which includes Mistress (Feng Fei) to celebrate the birthday of the King of Qi, in order to get

into his good books. For all you know, Zongsun Long will deliberately spoil his plans because of this reason.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is hearing about these developments. Feeling apprehensive on the spot, he bade farewell to Zhang Quan and left in a hurry.

At the main door, he checked with the sentries, asking them what is the direction Lei Yun'er & company had headed before giving chase.

As the rain and snow fell around him and the street lamps are being lighted along the streets of Lin Zi, he knows that due to extraordinary circumstances, he will inevitably be severely implicated in the power struggle for the position of the King of Qi.

CHAPTER 8

Local Villain

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AS Xiang Shaolong brisk-walked along the road, proceeding towards the central Little Lin Zi, he noticed the increase in the number of pedestrians. Under the illumination of the lanterns, the falling snowflakes resemble the Immortals sprinkling heavenly powder onto earth, giving his surroundings a dream-like appearance.

Most of his fellow foot-travellers are walking in small groups and are speaking in different dialects. They are probably admirers of the Three Courtesans from the other six States

or even the Qi people from the countryside. The locals only made up a handful of the crowd.

According to Xiao Yuetan, Lin Zi is home to approximately seventy thousand households and has a population of three hundred thousand. Compared to Xianyang, it is far less populated.

As he was beginning to panic in his search for Lei Yun'er & company, he caught someone waving at him across the road. It turns out to be a family warrior Fei Chun (was wrongly named Fei Sun earlier, also a ex roomie) and five other drivers.

Waiting for two carriages to drive by before crossing the road, he came to the side of the six men and prodded: "Where are the others?"

Fei Chun invited: "They are headed to the red light district! We are looking for a place to have a drink. Why don't Manager Shen join us?"

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Do you know which brothel they are visiting?"

One of the drivers joked: "They surely cannot afford the expensive ones. Manager Shen only has to look for the most run-down brothel and you will definitely find them there." Fei Chun and the other drivers burst out laughing.

Witnessing their lively mood and making sure that there are no suspicious characters nearby, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to spoil their night. Pulling them aside to avoid blocking

the road, he then revealed: "Something has cropped up. Assistant Manager Zhang just informed me Mistress (Feng Fei) has offended a local villain of considerable influence. Although he cannot lay a finger on Mistress, he can effortlessly create trouble for us. Please go and have your drink, and return to the Villa as soon as possible."

Their faces drained of colour, Fei Chun and the drivers nodded in obedience.

Xiang Shaolong speedily continued his search for Lei Yun'er and the others. After walking for some time, all he could see were splendid buildings housing brothels or wine houses. He thought to himself that this is similar to Beijing's Wangfu Jing (王府井) in the 21st Century; unless you are a rich man, this place has nothing for you. The only places an average person can go are the small lanes and narrow streets, where the cheap thrills are situated.

His heart is swelling with regret.

At the end of the day, he lacks experience in managing people, simply because he does not believe in treating fellow humans as servants at his beck and call. His only wish is for them to be happy and free as much as the situation permits.

With the present unfavorable scenario, he should not have let them run amok.

His reservations are not without reason.

A sore and incensed Zongsun Long will use every opportunity to harass Feng Fei.

If he lands himself in trouble when they had just arrived in Lin Zi, everyone will lose confidence in this newly appointed General Manager. In addition, except for a dagger, he did not bring any weapons with him. If he gets into a fight, he will be at a serious disadvantage.

Burning with anxiety, he happened to see a crowd gathering in front of a brothel. The people are whispering to one another and pointing fingers at the brothel.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart sinking. Stepping forward, he squeezed into the pool of people and questioned: "What happened?"

Bearing scorn in his tone, one man ridicule: "Having the guts to visit prostitutes when he hasn't paid up his debt to Master Zongsun, these people do not know the meaning of death! Ai! Being dragged away like a pack of dogs, how shameful."

'Game over' Xiang Shaolong thought. He made enquiries about the appearances and dressings of the men being mugged and after confirming their identities are those of the missing Lei Yun'er and company, he announced: "Those men are my friends and I have brought the money to redeem their debts. Does anyone know where is Master Zongsun staying?"

Unexpectedly, the faces of everyone in the crowd lost colour. Not only did they fail to give him an answer, they ran off, disappearing without a trace, leaving him stunned on the spot.

Coincidentally, a shifty and mysterious-looking man happened to sneak out of the brothel, Xiang Shaolong grabbed him, asking: "Brother..."

The man was shocked out of his wits: "Please do not tell my wife..."

Xiang Shaolong is not in the mood to laugh at the man's blunder. He corrected: "Brother is mistaken. I am just asking for directions."

The man took a closer look and realized Xiang Shaolong is not someone familiar to him. Putting his hand on his chest, he panted: "I was nearly frightened to death! Even if you are asking for directions, you need not pull my shirt!"

Scanning this man, Xiang Shaolong guessed he is about twenty-five or twenty six years old. Dressed in flamboyant clothes, he is rather fine looking and must be the offspring of some Qi official. Loathing his hen-pecked behavior, Xiang Shaolong grumbled: "I am anxious to locate Master Zongsun's Residence. Little Brother (I) is his distant relative and is here to visit him."

The man sighed with relief: "Zongsun Residence is along Great Southern Way, diagonally opposite my house. Let me give you a ride! Ai! I also need to be home soon."

Xiang Shaolong is secretly delighted to meet such a friendly person and is now having a favourable impression of him. Together, they crossed the road to the opposite side.

There is a carriage parked outside a wine house and as they approached it, a driver climbed out of the carriage and sat down in the driver's seat in front.

The man proudly declared: "I intentionally parked the carriage here so that nobody will suspect I actually went to a brothel. Hey! I still do not know Brother's name."

Xiang Shaolong introduced: "I am Shen Liang. What about Brother?"

The man cheered: "I am called Xie Ziyuan. Come! Get in the carriage!"

As the carriage began to move, Xie Ziyuan comfortably lounged in his seat, praising: "Lan Lan's skin is as smooth as silk and she knows exactly what I want. What a pity I cannot stay overnight."

Xiang Shaolong has calmed down by now and is busily thinking of a plan to rescue his men back from Zongsun Long. He casually asked: "Is your wife ugly looking?"

Like a wronged man, Xie Ziyuan protested: "Of course not! Lan Lan may be rather good-looking but my wife is way prettier than her"

Xiang Shaolong's curiosity is aroused: "Then why is Brother Xie looking for other women?"

Xie Ziyuan explained: "Please do not jump to the conclusion that I have grown sick of looking at her. Actually, the more I look at her, the more I love her, and also fear her. Whenever

we start quarrelling, my Mum will side her and not me because she has given my mum two healthy grandsons.”

Xiang Shaolong sympathized: “Brother Xie is fooling around because your wife has failed to treat you in a kind and loving manner.”

Slapping his thigh, Xie Ziyuan exclaimed: “Brother Shen truly understands me! Ha! Can Brother Shen do me a favour?”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: “How can I help you?”

Xie Ziyuan leaned towards his ear as if he is afraid of being eavesdropped. He whispered softly: “Can you pretend to be my long lost friend, coming to visit me from a faraway place? Thus, I will have to play a good host to you and this will allow me to spend more time outside the household. Hey! I will not treat you shabbily and will pay for all of Brother Shen’s expenses.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or amused at his proposal. He rejected: “I will be quite busy over the next two days. I am afraid I cannot visit you at your honourable residence.”

Xie Ziyuan begged: “I will only take up a bit of your time. Is tomorrow good for you? I will wait for your esteemed arrival anytime after five pm.”

Xiang Shaolong helplessly agreed: “I will try my best to make time!”

Xie Ziyuan was thrilled: “Brother Shen is a true friend. Ai! You would not believe it even if I told you. I, Xie Ziyuan, am

an Imperial Treasurer but there is nobody who dares to accompany me to a brothel. Even when beauties surround me, there is not a single mate by my side. It is so depressing. Now, I am thankful for Brother Shen's company."

Xiang Shaolong secretly kicked himself for not recognizing someone's true status. The man is a high-ranking official of Qi and it is rare that he did not display any airs and speaks in a straightforward manner. He is starting to like this new friend of his.

He joked: "I think all your friends are frightened of your wife's scolding."

Xie Ziyuan muttered: "It is her beating."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was reeling in shock, the burly driver turned around and announced: "Young Master! We are reaching Master Zongsun's Residence."

Xie Ziyuan whispered again: "Only Xie Quan is loyal to me."

Finishing his sentence, he faced Xie Quan and commanded: "We will send Master Shen in before going home."

Holding Xiang Shaolong's hand, Xie Ziyuan apologized: "Please forgive Little Brother (me) for only sending you here but unable to stay and accompany you. I have a curfew and need to return immediately. If her anger is provoked, Little Brother (I) will be in trouble!"

The carriage stopped in the front of an enormous property filled with multiple courtyards. Next, Xie Quan reported Xie

Ziyuan's name to the sentries and the main door opened in an instant, allowing them to drive straight in.

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. He could not help but asked: "Brother Xie seems to be on good terms with Master Zongsun."

Xie Ziyuan smiled: "We have a few ongoing collaborations!"

He added: "The relationship between people are partly decided by fate. Somehow, when I first met Brother Shen, I can feel a sense of delight and instinctively feel that Brother Shen is a friend worth having. Hey! Remember to come by tomorrow night!" He pointed to the location of his residence.

In this moment, the carriage grinded to a halt, stopping in front of a flight of steps of the main building within the residence. A few muscular men accosted the carriage and their leader opened the carriage door, respectfully introducing: "Your servant is named Bao Guang. Will Official Xie please alight."

Xie Ziyuan started: "I am just sending Zong..."

Xiang Shaolong rapidly whispered into his ear: "I am not his relative."

Xie Ziyuan was stunned momentarily before continuing: "I am sending my good friend Shen Liang to pay his respects to Master Zongsun. Is Master Zongsun at home?"

Bao Guang was slightly surprised: "So it is Master Shen. Master (Zongsun) is hosting an esteemed guest from Chu.

Your servant (I) will notify him now. What does Master Shen want your servant (me) to report to Master (Zongsun)?”

Not wanting to reveal too much about himself to Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong turned to him and promised: “There is no need to hold back Brother Xie any longer. I will definitely see you tomorrow night.”

Concluding his sentence, he got down the carriage and watched Xie Ziyuan drove away.

As Xie Ziyuan was leaving, he continued waving back, not taking Xiang Shaolong’s lies to heart.

The main building inside Zongsun Residence is a spectacular Courtyard built entirely of white stone and is elevated above the ground. The main double doors and walls are lavishly sculptured.

Above the double doors is a majestic signboard with three words written on it: Zongsun Residence, flaunting the wealth and status of its occupant.

The main building is flanked by a left courtyard and right courtyard. Behind the building is a huge garden, housing many more courtyards that are further than what Xiang Shaolong is able to see. Sweeping his gaze across his surroundings, he observed that the entire cluster of courtyards is surrounded by another high wall. The layout of the residence is similar to a fortress and the first door that Xiang Shaolong entered is equivalent to a fortress gate.

As the raindrops and snowflakes fly through the air, scores of eight-sided lanterns are shining brightly into the square in front of the main building, making it look as bright as day. There is a carriage parked by the side but the horse has been led away. It probably belongs to the distinguished visitor of Chu.

Looking at his collected and awe-inspiring posture, Bao Guang dare not behave in a slipshod manner. He welcomed: "Master Shen, please enter to avoid the wind and snow before speaking!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded and climbed the steps alongside Bao Guang.

Zongsun Long is truly a renowned tycoon. The building materials used to build the main building are meticulously selected, leaving a strong impression on anyone who passes by. The pillars and beams are all made up of high quality Nan wood and only complete logs are used. Cornices are carved in suitable corners and stone sculptures are exquisitely engraved. It is an exciting sight to behold.

After sitting down, Xiang Shaolong then implored: "Brother Bao, please inform Master Zongsun that I am here regarding Feng Fei's issue."

With astonishment written all over his face, Bao Guang was in a fluster and hesitated for a while before entering the hall to make his report.

Xiang Shaolong coolly waited.

If Zongsun Long chose not to see him, what can he do?

Resorting to force is suicidal.

He retains some confidence that Zongsun Long will see him, for if he truly loves Feng Fei, his curiosity will certainly get the better of him and he would want to find out what Xiang Shaolong is up to.

After a short wait, Bao Guang summoned: "Master invites Brother Shen to go in."

Xiang Shaolong was incredulous that his plan is proceeding smoothly. He did not have time to delve further and quickly stood up and followed Bao Guang in.

Bao Guang whispered: "Master (Zongsun) is willing to see Master Shen because Master Shen (you) is a friend of Official Xie."

Xiang Shaolong knows that Bao Guang has intervened for him and hurriedly thanked him.

They passed through a garden path made up of crushed rocks before arriving at the entrance of the main hall. Four family warriors are standing guard on two sides.

Bao Guang stopped in his tracks and announced in a loud voice: "Master Shen is here!"

Witnessing the elaborate setup of the place, even Xiang Shaolong is feeling slightly uneasy. However, it is impossible to back out now. Taking a deep breath, he stepped over the door ledge. What entered his view is a well-maintained

classy interior, with a touch of antique elegance. A wide and bright yarn screen served as a divider, partitioning the massive hall into a south portion and a north portion. Every piece of furniture is made of top quality redwood. Beyond the screen, Xiang Shaolong can vaguely see two men sitting face to face, with serving maids on both sides. Behind each man stood a squad of family warriors, giving him the impression that the guest is not an ordinary person.

Under the direction of Bao Guang, Xiang Shaolong crossed the divider. Staring fiercely at him is a tall man in his forties and tastefully dressed in silk. For some reason, the man is as skinny as a chimpanzee.

When Xiang Shaolong laid his eyes on the other man, he was frightened out of his wits. He nearly wanted to turn around and run for his life.

It is Li Yuan whom he hasn't seen for some time.

His biggest regret now is not putting the fruit seed below his tongue, disguising his voice from Li Yuan.

Just by looking at Li Yuan's expression, he knows that his cover is blown and his disguise is useless.

When Li Yuan looked over, his body trembled slightly and surprise is written all over his handsome features in this face-to-face encounter as the four eyes meet.

Firstly, in order to negotiate with Zongsun Long, Xiang Shaolong did not bother to conceal his strides and heroic aura. Secondly, there is no one around that he can shy

behind. Thirdly, Li Yuan knows Xiang Shaolong more intimately than Tian Dan. Thus, he could recognize Xiang Shaolong in one look.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is secretly lamenting the end of his life, Li Yuan actually winked at him, giving him a ray of hope.

In terms of integrity and character, Lord Longyang should be more 'innocent' than Li Yuan. But life is always unpredictable.

There are two charming ladies standing behind Zongsun Long, massaging his skinny shoulder and back as he leaned against a cushion. This magnate who made his fortune through loan sharking looked at Xiang Shaolong through the corner of the eye and remarked: "Please have a seat!"

An absent-minded Xiang Shaolong paid his respects and sat down opposite the two men like a common criminal. In his mind, he was thinking: Zongsun Long, with your kind of looks, it is not surprising why the beautiful swan Feng Fei is not interested in you, the ugly toad.

Zongsun Long's bones supporting his eyebrows are exceptionally high and his gaze is sharp and piercing. Despite the lack of flesh on his face, his expressions are incredibly animated. Adorned by thick and long eyebrows, Zongsun Long condescendingly mocked: "Does Chancellor Li know why did I bother to attend to this anonymous fellow without any delay and even allow him to be seated opposite me?"

Initially, Xiang Shaolong thought Zongsun Long is speaking to him but realized that he is speaking to Li Yuan. His words are immensely ill mannered and carry an insulting tone.

With a strange expression on his face, Li Yuan answered: "Master Long has always handled your affairs in an unorthodox manner. I do not have the slightest idea."

Behaving as if Xiang Shaolong is invisible, Zongsun Long continued talking to Li Yuan: "It is because this person is sent here by Xie Ziyuan, therefore, I need to be accountable to him. When Xie Ziyuan ask about this matter in the future, he cannot hold me for treating his friend shabbily."

Turning his head over and staring at Xiang Shaolong with his squinty eyes, Zongsun Long demanded: "Report your identity and purpose, as well as your relationship to Xie Ziyuan. If I detect any lies, I guarantee you will never be able to walk out of here with your two legs."

Xiang Shaolong had barely calmed down and exchanged a look with 'the friend more trustworthy than Lord Longyang' Li Yuan before turning his head up and burst out laughing.

Behind Zongsun Long, several family warriors are now glaring at Xiang Shaolong viciously with their hands on the hilt of their swords. Once Zongsun Long gives the command, they will beat the daylights out of Xiang Shaolong.

His eyes rotating wildly, Zongsun Long roared: "What is so funny?"

Xiang Shaolong stopped laughing in an instant. With his eyes shining ominously, he stared at Zongsun Long and ridiculed: "I am laughing because the earth-shattering Zongsun Long is actually a rich man using his resources to bully the weak. No wonder Miss Feng Fei chose to reject you."

Before Zongsun Long has the chance to speak out, the two family warriors standing behind Xiang Shaolong pounced on him from the left and right. From their body movements, they probably want to drag Xiang Shaolong up from his seat and force him down on his knees.

Just when Li Yuan is grimacing at the potential onslaught, Xiang Shaolong has skillfully grabbed the two rough hands that have landed on his shoulders. Without moving his body, he deftly twisted their arms, using their momentum to slam the two family warriors in front of himself.

Behind Zongsun Long, the family warriors are protesting angrily. Drawing their swords, they advanced towards Xiang Shaolong.

When a fight looks inevitable, Li Yuan thundered: "Hold it!"

The warriors freeze in bewilderment.

The two family warriors who were thrown to the floor are now getting back on their feet. Both were holding their hands with a pained expression on their faces. Xiang Shaolong had evidently twisted both their wrists.

Zongsun Long was in a daze and bellowed: "Back down!"

The squad of family warriors returned to their original positions while the two injured men left the hall. The hall is now as quiet as before but the atmosphere is as tense as a fully drawn arrow on a bow.

Xiang Shaolong acted as if nothing had happened, coldly exchanging glances with Zongsun Long.

Zongsun Long suppressed his anger and faced Li Yuan: "Why did Chancellor Li prevent me from teaching this arrogant fellow a lesson?"

Li Yuan swept his gaze across the warriors behind him and plainly state: "If I were Master Long, I will give these servants a beating for taking matters into their own hands. Before Master Long gave the order, they have lost control of their emotions and commence an attack. This move could potentially cause Master Long to lose your life."

Zongsun Long was taken aback: "Cause me to lose my life?"

By now, Xiang Shaolong is certain that Li Yuan will not betray him. His spirits soaring and resuming his heroic aura, he laughed loudly: "Chancellor Li is really smart. Watch it!"

As fast as lightning, Xiang Shaolong pulled out the dagger tied to his foot and threw it towards a food laden long table in front of Zhongsun Long.

Pok!

The men were staring speechlessly and the maids cried out as the dagger embedded itself deeply into the hard redwood.

Looking at the dagger handle that is still quivering, Zongsun Long's face is drained of colour and he was dumbstruck for some time.

The large hall is completely silent as everyone's attention is now on the dagger.

Nobody dared to move for it is possible that Xiang Shaolong may throw a second dagger at him. Moreover, Li Yuan had earlier chastised the family warriors for taking things into their own hands and deserves punishment. This time round, none of the earlier antics were repeated.

A powerful and accurate attack like this will surely bring fear to anyone who hears of it but what really subdued Zongsun Long is Xiang Shaolong's display of confidence and heroic air.

Xiang Shaolong plainly asked: "Can we have a good talk now?"

This is the first time ever Zongsun Long feels that his life is at stake. He took a deep breath and agreed: "Fine! Seeing that you possess such an extraordinary skill, speak your mind!"

Xiang Shaolong first turned to Li Yuan and smiled: "Chancellor Li is truly brilliant, guessing that I came prepared."

Li Yuan smiled back: "Just by observing Brother Shen's icy demeanor, I instinctively knew you must be a top assassin."

His gaze turning back to Zongsun Long's face, Xiang Shaolong officially state: "I, Shen Liang, is Miss Feng Fei's General Manager, assisting her in overseeing the operations of the

Troupe. I also happen to be a very good friend of Xie Ziyuan but if Master Long wishes to harm me, you need not worry about spoiling your friendship with Xie Ziyuan. Since I, Shen Liang, dare to come to you, I have cast my life aside. It is better to die with honour than to live in infamy.”

Li Yuan was agitated: “It is better to die with honour than to live in infamy. This is a very meaningful sentence.”

Zongsun Long and everyone else were moved as they can clearly feel Xiang Shaolong’s fearlessness, even towards death.

This is an era where talented men are highly valued. Regardless of whether one is rich or poor, as long as one exhibits talent or is educated, one will be respected wherever one goes.

Zongsun Long has never met anyone of Xiang Shaolong’s caliber. Faced with Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan’s continuous verbal assault, coupled with this life-threatening situation, his ferocity has greatly mellowed.

Nevertheless, he is still a notorious triad boss who is not new to perilous environments and has overcome his fair share of trials and tribulations. Zongsun Long bluntly pointed: “You have earned your right to speak but if you are here to pit yourself against me, I am afraid you have overestimated yourself.”

Li Yuan interrupted: “Will Master Long allow Li Yuan (me), this neutral party, to say a few words in fairness?”

Zongsun Long would not dare to offend the highly ranked Li Yuan who easily enjoys the entire backing of Chu. He politely acquiesced: "Chancellor Li, please speak."

Attempting to ease the hostility, Li Yuan professed: "I wish to have Brother Shen's assurance that he will not release any more hidden weapons. Only then can we talk amicably."

Xiang Shaolong knows that this strategy is to give Zongsun Long an opportunity to back down. Moreover, he did not have any daggers left. He gladly agreed: "I, Shen Liang, dare not disobey Chancellor. In addition, I have always been an admirer of Master Long and was forced by circumstances to act against my own wishes. I pray that Master Long can be magnanimous and pardon me."

Earlier on, Xiang Shaolong appears to be strong-willed and unyielding but is now using condescending words towards him. This flattery is extremely successful and Zongsun Long's expression became warmer. In a deep voice, he remarked: "What does Chancellor Li propose?"

Li Yuan harmoniously inquired: "What is Brother Shen's motive for coming here?"

Xiang Shaolong simply answered: "I am here to ask a favour from Master Long, begging him to show mercy and release my comrades, and not make things difficult for Miss Feng Fei."

Zongsun Long secretly regretted summoning Shen Liang into the main hall.

Feng Fei is highly respected by everyone all over the world. If he is openly making trouble for her, what will Li Yuan think of him?

He is used to doing whatever he pleases and initially wanted to rough up Xiang Shaolong, demonstrating his might in front of Li Yuan. He is not someone who gives up easily but if he refuses Xiang Shaolong's request, he will be digging a bigger hole for himself.

His initial plan is to break Xiang Shaolong's legs and have someone to carry him back. Not only can he indirectly challenge Tian Dan's authority, it is also sending Feng Fei a message that he is unafraid of anyone, pressuring her to succumb to him.

Given the current scenario when the man in front of his eyes can take his life in a flash, he obviously cannot carry out this plan.

While he is contemplating, Li Yuan laughed: "I am sure this is a misunderstanding! Master Long will not bear grudges against these servants."

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan supported each other verbally, causing Zongsun Long's face to lose colour, both men are secretly amused.

Being forced into a corner, Zongsun Long had no choice but to snarl at his men: "Who is responsible for kidnapping Miss Feng's subordinates? Did it really happen?"

One of his brainier followers caught the hint and responded: "There were some men creating a scene at a brothel earlier and they got into a scuffle with our guys. We seized them and were prepared to send them to the magistrate office tomorrow. We did not know they are Manager Shen's followers."

Zongsun Long pretended to be angry: "In this case, release all of them immediately and send them back to Miss Feng."

His subordinate left to execute his order.

Li Yuan stood up and bade farewell. To Xiang Shaolong, he offered: "Manager Shen is highly skilled and your bravery is unheard of. I, Li Yuan, admire men like you. Why don't I send Brother Shen back and use this occasion to have a little chat?"

Xiang Shaolong is deeply grateful because this arrangement will prevent Zongsun Long from exacting revenge on him.

Zongsun Long's attitude underwent a huge change and suddenly became very hospitable, personally sending both men to the door.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize Zongsun Long is a very tall man, almost as tall as himself.

This bloodsucker looks much more daunting when standing up.

Until the carriage exited Zongsun Residence did Xiang Shaolong finally heaved a sigh of relief but his whole body is already covered with cold sweat.

CHAPTER 9

Hard to Distinguish between Leader and Follower

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

SLAPPING Xiang Shaolong's fake potbelly, Li Yuan chortled: "If not for your equally shocked expression when you laid your eyes on me, as I first laid my eyes on you, I may be tricked by this fake potbelly. Your looks have indeed changed a lot."

Xiang Shaolong confessed: "Of course I would be shocked; because there is a chance that you will betray me."

Li Yuan was offended: "I, Li Yuan, will never be such a despicable fellow. If we were fairly engaged in war, I would

not be the least upset if I lose or die. But how can I sabotage you when you are obviously at a disadvantage?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed, recalling Lord Longyang's betrayal. But for some reason, he is unwilling to brand this friend as a despicable cad.

Li Yuan was taken aback: "Looking at your expression, it seems you were once betrayed by an old friend."

Glancing at the wide roads of the Qi Capital outside the carriage window, Xiang Shaolong's heart is in turmoil and he did not know what to say.

In the past, his trust in Li Yuan is way lower than his trust in Lord Longyang.

But Li Yuan can maintain this camaraderie is partly because Li Yuan is from the State of Chu. He does not feel the pressure of a direct Qin invasion unlike the three States of Zhao, Han and Wei.

Li Yuan stretched out his hand, hugging Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and revealed: "I met Han Chuang this afternoon and he is still grateful to you for setting him free at the risk of your own life. He told me he had wanted to help you when you were on the run but his hands are tied and cannot defy his King. I believe he is bluffing. This fellow indulges in wine, sex, money and ego, leading a repugnant lifestyle. He could be saying one thing and yet doing another."

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's disillusioned appearance, he went on: "Shaolong is exceedingly gifted. Even when you lose the

battle, you lost beautifully and evaded the extensive manhunt by the States of Zhao, Wei and Han. Presently, everyone thinks that you are back at Zhongmou. Who could possibly imagine that you have miraculously become the manager of the top beauty Feng Fei and have made your way to Lin Zi?”

Picking himself up, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Why did you make time to come all the way here?”

Li Yuan chuckled: “You should be able to guess what is going on! Qi did not participate in the two allied attacks and even create trouble for us. As a result, the Five States are now collaborating to support Second Prince Tian Jian to become the next King of Qi, using this opportunity to topple First Prince Tian Sheng and Tian Dan’s syndicate. I visited Zongsun Long precisely for this purpose.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Based on your theory, Lu Buwei must have come here to support Tian Dan.”

His eyes flashing with extreme coldness, Li Yuan coldly snorted: “Lu Buwei still thinks he is living in his past glorious days. He must be dreaming. Everybody knows that the most influential man in Qin is you, Shaolong. Ha! Are you aware that you can soon travel wherever you want without concealing your true identity?”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “What do you mean?”

Li Yuan exhaled a breath of air: “The five states alliance has lost heavily to Shaolong’s army and are unable to continue fighting. Thus, we are forced to seek truce and every State is

secretly sending messengers to sign a peace treaty with Qin, hoping not be a target of an invasion. Regarding this matter, Shaolong must lend Little Brother (me) a helping hand.”

Xiang Shaolong declared: “Even without you bringing it up, I will still do my best to help you. Seriously speaking, even if they threaten to kill me, I will never lead an invading army.”

Li Yuan praised: “Shaolong is Shaolong indeed. Otherwise, there is no way Han Chuang can be freed!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Even if the treaty is signed, there are still many people after my life.”

Li Yuan guffawed: “When the treaty is finalized, you can openly reveal your identity, telling everyone where you are. I guarantee no one will dare to touch you. Everyone knows you are Yingzheng’s most respected teacher and anyone who offends you is asking for his country to be invaded.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “During the period when nobody knows if you are dead or alive, Yingzheng blew his top and gave the order to launch a full scale invasion against Zhao. While Li Mu is busy engaging Zhongmou City, Huan Qi, Yang Duanhe, Meng Wu and Meng Tian attacked Zhao relentlessly, taking no prisoners, inflicting heavy damage and occupying a large piece of territory. With regards to this attack, Wei and Han chose not to offer any assistance. (Empress) Hanjing, Guo Kai and their conspirators are now regretting their earlier support of Po Hu, which has indirectly resulted in their predicament.”

Xiang Shaolong felt bad about causing so much trouble but there is nothing he can do.

Li Yuan suddenly cheered: "From Shaolong's point of view, should we cause Lu Buwei to never set foot again in Xianyang? The people of Qi may protect him but we can always lay an ambush, killing him and every single one of his companions."

Xiang Shaolong is greatly moved but recognizes the fact that Lu Buwei will surely survive. In a deep voice, he advocated: "Lu Buwei's days are numbered. We need not bother ourselves with him. Moreover, no one will want Lu Buwei to die within his territory. We should focus our energies on toppling Tian Dan."

When he heard Tian Dan's name, Li Yuan became boiling mad. He furiously swore: "Tian Dan once collaborated with Lord Chunshen to harm me, I will definitely make him pay for what he did to me."

Lowering his voice, he smugly divulged: "The reason King Xiang stripped Tian Sheng of his Crown Prince title is because his beloved concubine Lady Ning accused Tian Sheng of harboring malicious intentions against her. Ha! Can Shaolong guess who is Lady Ning? She is Lady Qingxiu's sister."

Xiang Shaolong finally saw the big picture and deduced it to be a scheme cooked up to discredit Tian Sheng. Li Yuan is sharing such a piece of critical information with him, exhibiting his utmost trust in him, Xiang Shaolong.

Li Yuan continued: "I don't think you have forgotten who is Lady Qingxiu right? She met you when she made a trip to Xianyang and she specially made a trip here as well. She has moved into the palace while I am staying at the villa beside yours."

Xiang Shaolong obviously will not forget this lady who has zero interest in all men, including himself. He did not foresee that all his acquaintances are unexpectedly gathered together in Lin Zi.

Li Yuan joked: "Shaolong should have tried Feng Fei by now!"

Xiang Shaolong waved him off: "Don't make wild guesses. There is nothing between the two of us. But I will require Brother Li's assistance on this matter. Besides Zongsun Long, Lu Buwei is harbouring ulterior motives against her."

Li Yuan is elated: "That is easy. Once we returned to Chu, we will be invulnerable."

Xiang Shaolong seriously advised: "Brother Li must not belittle our enemies. Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are not easy to deal with. For all you know, they will come up with a scheme and allow Tian Sheng to instantly become the new King of Qi."

His expression turning solemn, Li Yuan nodded: "Shaolong is right. I am not giving enough credit to my enemies."

Seeing that Tingsong Villa is within reach, Xiang Shaolong recommended: "It is better to let me off the carriage here. I want to keep a low profile."

Li Yuan unwillingly pleaded: "Can we fix another appointment where we can catch up? I would like to know how you happen to end up here and even became Feng Fei's manager in the process."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "Tomorrow is out of the question. I will contact you again!"

After both men decided on a communication method, Xiang Shaolong got off the carriage.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into Tingsong Villa, the family warriors on sentry duty came to attention in a respectful manner. Their attitude towards him is completely different from before.

Xiang Shaolong clearly knew the reason for the change. One of them reported: "Lei Yun'er and the others have just been sent here and they are only slightly bruised. Master Shen is really great to make Zongsun Long release them obediently."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Is Mistress (Feng Fei) back?"

Another family warrior bowed: "She has been back for half an hour. She had given instructions for you to see her immediately upon your return."

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to ask: "Did Mister Tan come back as well?"

The family warrior replied: "Mister Tan has returned to his Tingmei Villa. I think he will probably come over tomorrow."

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Xiao Yuetan is gathering intelligence. Nodding his head in acknowledgement, he head alone towards the inner courtyard in search of Feng Fei

He barely crossed over the door ledge to the inner courtyard where Feng Fei is staying when Little Ping'er came up to him. Her icy demeanor unable to conceal her delight, she welcomed: "You are finally back."

Xiang Shaolong wished he could give her a loving pat. He mumbled: "Thank you Sister Ping for your concern."

Little Ping'er purposely put on a solemn expression and lowered her head, uttering: "I am not concerned about you but Mistress is anxiously awaiting your return."

Xiang Shaolong really wanted to embrace her into his bosom and comfort her with sweet words but he is unable to love another new woman. He maintained his silence and climbed up the stairs to the upper floor as she had directed.

Feng Fei had removed all her make-up, accessories, and is dressed in simple clothes. Sitting at a corner of the small hall, her face reddened slightly when she saw him, likely due to her recalling Xiang Shaolong forcefully kissing her the night before. She was elated: "You are back! I am so worried for you! Come and have a sit!"

Xiang Shaolong subserviently sat down on the floor opposite her, joking: "I am certain Mistress has mesmerized the entire Court officials of Qi."

Feng Fei viciously shot him a look, giving him a hint of excitement. The pretty lass was curious: "What trickery did you employ, allowing the malevolent Zongsun Long to release our men?"

Xiang Shaolong casually state: "Of course by using the gift of the gab (literal translation = skillful tongue), is Mistress satisfied with my answer?"

He was just spouting nonsense but his words have an entirely different meaning in the ears of Feng Fei. Her face flushed with crimson red, she wailed: "I have yet to get even with you regarding what happened last night. How dare you.... I..."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realized he had used an inappropriate description. He awkwardly defended: "That is not what I meant... Hey..."

Feng Fei became so shy she did not know where to hide her face. Even the roots of her ear lobes are thoroughly red. She appears to be at a loss and it was a very enticing look.

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to handle such a situation.

The lure of Feng Fei now is comparable to Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. If not for the fact that she has someone else in mind, Xiang Shaolong doubts he can hold his ground any longer.

Feng Fei recomposed herself after an extended period. She gloomily exhaled a breath of air: "I should not be with you alone in a room like this but unfortunately, our conversation cannot be heard by a third person."

Giving him another glare, she insisted: "You must behave yourself."

Xiang Shaolong secretly groaned to himself. If she carried on speaking to him in such a manner, he cannot tell how long his willpower can last.

Expelling a breath of air, he queried: "How is Tian Dan's attitude towards Mistress?"

Feng Fei is still recovering from her bashfulness and she contemplated for some time before finding the words: "On the surface he is obviously very cordial but I can sense that he is trying to trick me into revealing my plans. How can I ever trust him like before? I certainly would not tell him the truth. Ai! Right now, Feng Fei (I) can no longer distinguish the leader-follower relationship between you and I. It is all your fault."

Finishing, she lowered her head again.

Xiang Shaolong instantly regretted his moment of folly last night when he forcefully kissed her, causing their relationship to become ambiguous. The atmosphere is awkward but yet filled with attraction.

If she did not use his name as a cover up for her secret lover, no matter whose name she used, he will not be stimulated to perform such an unusual act.

For the time being, both parties did not know to say, resulting in a quiet impasse.

Feng Fei finally broke the silence and gently chided: "You are simply extraordinary beyond comprehension. Based on Zongsun Long's fearlessness and recklessness in Lin Zi, why should he do you a favour? However, you chose not to tell me what had transpired. Should Feng Fei (I) have the right to suspect that you have betrayed Feng Fei (me) and have made a secret pact with him?"

Xiang Shaolong was peeved: "You are doubting me again."

Feng Fei gave him a meaningful look and softly lowered her eyelids halfway. In a remarkably warm voice, she mentioned: "While attending the banquet earlier, I sincerely inquired from Mister Tan about your character after having spent the past few days with you. Mister Tan is an expert judge of character and his analysis is consistently accurate. It was he who advised me that Lu Buwei is completely unreliable, which is why Feng Fei (I) has a high regard for his opinions."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused. He is uncertain regarding Xiao Yuetan's fortune telling abilities but his views of Lu Buwei are unquestionable. He simply enquired: "What did he say?"

Her eyes flashing with a strange look, Feng Fei whispered: "He told me two sentences, of which I do not agree to the first one and felt really bizarre about the second one."

Unlike before, Xiang Shaolong is no longer afraid of anyone exposing his identity. Worse come to worse, he will go over and depend on Li Yuan. This is the territory of Qi and nobody will have the guts to attack him, Xiang Shaolong, offending the two powerful States of Qin and Chu simultaneously.

Even Lu Buwei has to 'protect' him; otherwise Xiao Pan will put the blame on him.

After hearing this, his curiosity is significantly aroused and he asked: "May I know the details?"

Feng Fei unhappily shot him a glare: "Mister Tan says you are a steadfast, perfect gentlemen and I can place absolute trust in you."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: "A perfect gentleman is not allowed to kiss a beauty? If I am a gentleman, you can place all your trust in me without any reservations. Why would you feel bizarre about it?"

'Pu ci!' Feng Fei's originally stern face could not help but break out into a shrill giggle. Glaring at him once, blaming him for making her laugh, she faintly wailed: "Of course a gentleman can kiss a lady's lips but someone forcing a kiss on a lady is not a gentleman. Since you are not a gentleman, why shouldn't I suspect there is something going on between you and Zongsun Long?"

Feasting his eyes on her curvaceous body and protruding chest, Xiang Shaolong mischievously laughed: "If I am not a gentleman, Miss Feng would have lost your virginity last night."

Initially, Feng Fei had resumed her serenity but her face is flushed with red streaks all over again. She loudly protested: "You are getting out of hand!"

Xiang Shaolong acted as if nothing had happened. He offered: "It is precisely so that I ran out of options in life. In my opinion, every human being is equal and should enjoy the same rights. The differences between a king and his subordinates or an employer and his employees are just a matter of appointments and responsibilities! If it is not to Mistress's liking, your servant (I) can always behave as if the kiss never happened."

Feng Fei whined: "Can you stop bringing up this issue?"

Xiang Shaolong can thoroughly experience this complicated relationship the two of them are sharing. Opening up his palms, he reminded: "You are the one who mentioned it first. Don't come and blame me now."

Feng Fei could not win the debate. She sighed: "Take it that I, your superior, is afraid of you, the evil manager. Take it that I am begging you. Please quickly tell me what made Zongsun Long agree to release our men. Otherwise, Feng Fei (I) will surely be unable to sleep well tonight."

Xiang Shaolong then related the whole encounter accordingly, only withholding the fact that Li Yuan

recognised his true identity. To Feng Fei, the story clearly demonstrates Xiang Shaolong's chivalry, bravery and eagerness to help the less fortunate.

Her eyes wide open, Feng Fei stammered: "Do you know what is Xie Ziyuan's background?"

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: "Of course I know. He is a high ranking official."

Feng Fei rebuked: "It is much more than that. Not only is he at the peak of official ranks, he possess many other talents. Most of Lan Gongyuan's Song & Dance routines are composed by him. Moreover, he is the reading partner for Second Prince Tian Jian, which is why Zongsun Long has to make allowances for him."

With an understanding expression on his face, Xiang Shaolong finally learnt about the relationship between Zongsun Long and Xie Ziyuan but he did not find it surprising at all.

Feng Fei glanced at him with astonishment: "Why are you behaving in such an unaffected manner? Aren't you eyeing for wealth and an official appointment? Either Li Yuan or Xie Ziyuan can effortlessly make your dreams come true but you acted like you are not the least bit interested."

Xiang Shaolong secretly knew he had slipped up, exposing an undeniable loophole. He dryly coughed: "At that point in time, I was focused on saving our men and did not think about my own prospects."

Resuming her normal, icy poise and with her eyes glowing, Feng Fei pressured: "Manager Shen, do you know why I felt peculiar when Mister Tan told me I can place my absolute trust in you?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that her suspicions regarding him are like the gushing torrents of the Yellow River: There is just no turning back. He bitterly laughed: "Mistress had better keep it to yourself."

Feng Fei maintained: "I insist on saying it. You are the most insolent man I have ever met. Let me tell you! When Mister Tan was saying those words, I can tell from his body language that he is speaking as if he has known you for ten over years. He can give such a strong testimony about you without a moment's contemplation and without the slightest hesitation."

Xiang Shaolong can only sighed in his heart. At the end of the day, men are not as meticulous as women. While men are reliable in settling the big stuff, they are often unable to manage all the small details. Even the seasoned player Xiao Yuetan is of no exception.

Glaring nastily at him, Feng Fei interrogated: "Last night, Feng Fei (I) personally experienced your unforgivable kissing skills, deducing that you are not someone who is not stirred by women. However, you are not the least tempted by Ping'er, Shuzen or Xiuzhen, what is going on?"

In a state of panic, Xiang Shaolong defended: "I believe that it is due to Mistress's lack of sexual experience, mistaking my lousy kissing method to be a supreme kissing technique."

Overcome by shyness, Feng Fei dared not raise her head. She griped: "How dare you continue to spout nonsense."

Xiang Shaolong raised his hands in mock surrender: "We had a gentlemen's agreement to not bring up the kissing episode but it was you who brought it up again."

Feng Fei's face is so red it looked as if she is drunk. With a mixture of love and hate written on her incomparably pretty expression, she pretended to be angry: "No more messing around! Tell me when did you suddenly grow a potbelly and why do you have so much white hair?"

Xiang Shaolong gave it all he's got. He faked a surprise tone: "I have had this potbelly for a few years. Didn't you feel it last night? And after I found out that Mistress has a secret lover, I am gravely disappointed, causing my hair to turn white overnight."

Feng Fei suddenly lowered her head in silence.

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to react and meekly waited in silence.

It felt like a century when Feng Fei recomposed herself once again and gently remarked: "Why didn't Feng Fei (I) meet you earlier? For the past twenty-one years of my life, just now was the first time I can feel that all my worries have disappeared."

Not knowing how to answer her, Xiang Shaolong blew out a mouthful of air.

Earlier on, he, too, had momentarily forgotten about his wives and child in Xianyang.

Feng Fei respired a breath of air too and plainly concluded: "You are a true gentleman. Otherwise, you can easily make use of my vulnerability now to obtain my body. Presently, my fate is intertwined with yours. Can you honestly tell me who are you trying to evade with your disguise?"

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief, acknowledging that she had not guessed his true identity. He articulated: "Of course it is to prevent the people of Zhao from recognizing me. If they know that I am here, they will do whatever it takes to bring misfortune to me. Mister Tan and I know each other many years back when he came to visit Handan. Mistress should understand my grievances now."

Feng Fei nagged: "Can you stop acting like a servant in front of me? Feng Fei has seen all kinds of men but there is no one who has as much self-control as you, being able to resist sexual temptations. Ai! It is late! You have had a busy day, please go back and rest!"

Feeling like the king had just pardoned him from a death sentence, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly paid his respect and is about to take his leave.

Feng Fei groused: "You look like you cannot wait to get away."

The lure of Feng Fei's lovely appearance is making it difficult for Xiang Shaolong to live up to her expectation of a gentleman with excellent self-control.

Knowing that she is still stuck in a dilemma, he shifted towards her and half squatted down. He reached his hand out below her chin, slowly lifting her gorgeous head up to face himself, provoking: "Does Mistress know what are the consequences of your words?"

Feng Fei seemed to have lost all resistance and self-conscious, allowing him to make this suggestive move. Her bright eyes closing halfway, she whispered: "You won't. Right?"

Xiang Shaolong kissed her deeply, thoroughly enjoying it as she kissed passionately in return before he summoned all his willpower to break the kiss and quietly left.

When he reached the lower level, Little Ping'er is sitting at a corner with her back facing him.

He sighed with a breath, hardened his resolve and walked away.

CHAPTER 10

Surrounded By Women

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

TINGSONG Villa employs a courtyard design: The front area is used for miscellaneous activities and the rear area is used for living quarters. All courtyards are symmetrical in design. Walking in from the main door, one will pass by a small square, followed by a sitting room, the main hall and a rear living room. The rooms on the left and right are used for various purposes, such as a study room, a playroom, etc.

Beyond that is a huge garden and a 'Sanjing' styled residence. The residence is a cluster of eight courtyards,

clearly allocated to different people based on their status and importance. Another well-decorated garden filled with various plants and trees surrounds the residence.

Feng Fei's block is right in the centre of the eight courtyards, with a backdrop of fake mountains, fountains, ponds, bushes, trees and even potted plants. It is a view to die for.

It happened to stop snowing as Xiang Shaolong is leaving the main block. Behind the clouds, the moon is showing half its face. As the golden yellow rays shine down on the silvery white garden, it creates a soothing effect, allowing Xiang Shaolong to relax his tense sensations.

It will be heaven on earth if he is able to spend the night with Feng Fei in the upper floor of the main block.

Pondering on this thought, Xiang Shaolong had a shock as he stopped at the edge of the garden. If they proceeded with several more encounters in a similar fashion, he will eventually succumb to temptation and have a sexual relationship with Feng Fei.

Letting his eyes take in the exotic and therapeutic garden sightings, he becomes even more aware of the cloak and dagger politics and evil darkness at work.

As he was brimming with emotions, a glib and sweet voice sounded out behind him: "Why is Manager Shen standing there for such a long time?"

Xiang Shaolong turned around. Like an angel appearing in the night, this beauty gracefully sashayed to him. Just one

step away before the two bodies collide, she halted her advance and raised her delicate and exquisite face, looking at him meaningfully, awaiting his reply.

He obviously could not tell her what he is truly thinking. He spluttered: "I am immersing myself in the wonderful landscaping of the garden. Whoever designed this garden must be a top horticulturist, being able to blend man-made structures and Mother Nature into one body, creating infinite possibilities in such a limited space."

In the same instant, he detected a quick flashing of candle light from Feng Fei's room on the upper floor. He deduced that there is someone who moved to the window before hiding at a side, blocking the candlelight and causing the alleged flashing of the candlelight. Needless to say, she is eavesdropping on their conversation.

Hearing his description, Zhu Xiuzhen became intoxicated in his words. She praised: "That is an excellent description by Manager Shen. I know nature can represent certain moods and feelings. For example, a banana tree reminds me of the falling raining, a fruit tree reminds me of the autumn harvest; a wall reminds me of a row of bamboo. But never did I think of nature as thoroughly and as penetrating as Manager Shen."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Why hasn't Miss Xiuzhen retired for the night?"

Pulling the corner of his shirt, Zhu Xiuzhen walked him to the side of a pond far away from the main block before whispering: "Sa Li came to see me today."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Why wasn't I aware of it?"

Zhu Xiuzhen explained: "Gu Ming let him in secretly through the back door. Xiuzhen (I) and him were lovers before. I cannot harden my heart to not see him."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong can recall the venomous look in Sa Li's eyes as he was being dismissed. He questioned in a deep voice: "What did he say?"

Zhu Xiuzhen sighed: "I should not be telling you this but he sounded so serious there is no way I can hide it from you. He swore he would hack you and Zhang Quan to pieces. Judging from his tone, I am sure he has someone backing him up."

As Xiang Shaolong thought of Gu Ming, Fu Yan and the rest of the gang who used to follow Sa Li's leadership, he can feel his own fighting spirit soaring. If he does not make the first move to rid the troupe of these internal spies, in the future, a careless move could see him at a disadvantage and sustaining heavy losses.

He icily quizzed: "Did you try to find out who are his backers?"

Zhu Xiuzhen was stunned: "He is not willing to reveal his employer. Ai. Can you please give him a way out? He is a man who has lost everything."

Xiang Shaolong frankly state: "If you are dumb enough, he will still get to own you and your riches. The fact that he is working with a powerful mastermind clearly shows that he is just making use of you."

Guilt-ridden, Zhu Xiuzhen lowered her head.

Patting her shoulder, Xiang Shaolong comforted: "Please go back to bed; I will take care of this matter. In the future, do not ever meet him alone and do come to me if you have any problems."

Tugging the corner of his sleeve, Zhu Xiuzhen offered: "Will you allow me to accompany you tonight? You are now the hero of the Troupe."

Stretching out his hand, Xiang Shaolong pinched her cheek, laughing: "I am dead tired and had several frightening encounters today. All I want to do is to lie down and have a good rest. I will have to defer Miss's generous offer!"

Catching up to his departing figure, Zhu Xiuzhen charmingly suggested: "I am an expert masseuse. Shall I serve you a round of massage? I guarantee you will fall asleep before you know it."

Xiang Shaolong is highly aroused but he remembered Feng Fei has activated his flames of passion earlier. If he allows himself to be further sexually aggravated by Zhu Xiuzhen's massage, the small fire can burn down an entire forest. He would lose control and violate his own commandment. Thinking about this, he reached out his hand and embrace her towards himself, giving her a light peck on her lips,

gently professing: "With such a fine female specimen on my bed, how can I remain unmoved and how can I fall asleep easily?"

Zhu Xiuzhen breathed heavily: "You do not love me. That is why you do not allow me to serve you."

Trying his best to pacify and kiss her, Xiang Shaolong finally slipped away after much difficulty. Before he reached his room, he was intercepted by Zhang Quan and was dragged into his room. Zhang Quan probed: "How did you persuade Zongsun Long to release our men? Did you promise him certain benefits?"

He certainly could not be as open with Zhang Quan as compared to Feng Fei. Pretending to break out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong whispered: "Fortunately, the Chancellor of Chu, Li Yuan, is at the scene. He knows I represent Mistress (Feng Fei) and put in a good word for me. Zongsun Long is afraid of offending him and agreed to release our men as a result."

Zhang Quan frowned: "Do you think Li Yuan has designs on Mistress too? Today's troubles are all because you did not consult me regarding human resource management. Do not make the same mistake in the future."

While he agreed with Zhang Quan on this point, he was glad to make the mistake. Otherwise, he would not know the extent of Li Yuan's friendship. Inspired, he enquired: "Do you know who Sa Li's employer is?"

Zhang Quan apparently did not know about Sa Li's secret meeting with Zhu Xiuzhen and was astounded at this comment. He implored: "What happened?"

Xiang Shaolong mumbled jumbled: "Mistress (Feng Fei) told me someone has seen Sa Li loitering around."

After a short contemplation, Zhang Quan shook his head: "I am not very sure. Sa Li is a citizen of Zhao and he could be working for someone influential in Zhao."

Xiang Shaolong found this information to be greatly helpful. He bade his farewell and returned to his own room.

Stepping into his room, a vague fragrance entered his nostrils.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid of being poisoned by sleep-inducing incense or something related and instantly held his breath. When he was about to light his lamp, Dong Shuzen's gentle voice can be heard from his bed: "I do not want the lights on."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a big headache approaching. Earlier tonight, he had been sexually tempted first by Feng Fei, followed by Zhu Xiuzhen. He can feel his willpower decreasing with each new encounter. Moreover, Dong Shuzen is a high-class escort and even if he laid her, he need not feel accountable for this love debt. Momentarily, his mind is filled with the possibility of this one night stand.

Dong Shuzen naughtily cooed: "Why aren't you coming over?"

With a bitter smile, Xiang Shaolong walked over to her. Under the faint illumination of the moonlight through the window, coupled with his familiarity of the room in darkness, he is able to vaguely see his way.

Pulling the bed curtains to one side, he saw Dong Shuzen sitting on his bed with a blanket wrapped around her body. She coquettishly smiled: "Please do not be mistaken. I am only here because I have some secrets to tell you."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself: What if underneath that blanket is her naked body? He can feel a sense of disappointment.

Xiang Shaolong took off his shoes and readily dumped his overcoat on a chair. Climbing onto his bed, he sat down cross-legged facing her and examined: "What kind of secrets is it that has to be revealed on the bed?"

Dong Shuzen's aura of exquisiteness may be inferior to Feng Fei's but she is not too far off. Her beauty is comparable to Dan Meimei. In addition, she is at the prime of her youth, fresh and at an ideal age. Regardless of how you look at it, she is certainly an erection-inducing beauty, a person who will make you lose your self-control. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is filled with perverse thoughts and he would be lying to himself if he said he is not tempted at all.

Dong Shuzen released her grip and allow the cotton blanket to slip off, revealing her perfect hourglass naked upper body.

Under the hazy moonlight, her prominent and high nose became more outstanding, as did her firm and protruding breasts, evoking countless mesmerizing sensations.

The killing point is due to her fast breathing, her supple flesh are quivering minutely, causing Xiang Shaolong to lose his soul in this seducing rhythm.

As Xiang Shaolong was highly agitated, Dong Shuzen's smooth and warm body snaked into his bosom, letting him enjoy the slick, fragrant and soft female body sticking onto his own, creating intense excitement.

Although Xiang Shaolong unconsciously hugged her tightly in return, his mind remains clear and sharp. He whispered: "Can you first state your intentions?"

Dong Shuzen unwilling wriggled, causing Xiang Shaolong to become even more disconcerted. Gritting his teeth in endurance, he refocused his mind and warned: "If you are using your body to bribe me, you will earn nothing but my disdain."

It is not often that he employs such cruel words to a female but if not for this; he will unquestionably fall into this flesh trap.

As anticipated, Dong Shuzen's body trembled and she withdrew herself from him.

Xiang Shaolong's mind is still filled with connotations of himself cuddling her tender and slim waist. He could not

help but advance his lips towards her, enjoying the taste of her ruby lips.

Soon, Dong Shuzen has entangled herself around his thick and muscular neck but after they stopped kissing, she did not try to seduce him with any suggestive actions.

Seeing that he was silent, Dong Shuzen slowly asked: "You do not love Shuzen?"

Even if he did not love her, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to say it out for this is against his own conscious. He bitterly laughed: "A man who does not love you is not an ordinary man. But we are now in an unusually dangerous situation and surrounded by enemies crying for our blood. If we enter into a relationship without making sure of each other's agenda, it will only complicate matters and worsen the situation."

Dong Shuzen sat up straight. She apologized: "I did not think about this point. I only wish that after giving my body to you, I would be able to enjoy some of your love and attention in the future. You are truly exceptional, even Zongsun Long has to make allowances for you."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Unlike the others, why didn't you suspect Zongsun Long and I came to a secret understanding?"

Dong Shuzen sweetly chirped: "Because I know you are more than that." Xiang Shaolong immediately felt that she is a friend whom he can confide in but is also concerned that she is just trying to sweet-talk him. He proposed: "If I am able to

let Mistress (Feng Fei) retire peacefully and allow you to inherit her business, forming your own Troupe, how would you feel about that?"

Dong Shuzen's body greatly quavered but she recovered as quickly and shook her head: "That is impossible. I have just received news that Mistress (Feng Fei) is giving us away as presents and our new owner is someone influential within the Six Eastern States. Right now, I only pray for someone to take me and my savings away from this place. It does not matter where I end up."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You should have known this matter much earlier and did not just receive the news!"

Dong Shuzen nodded: "Your deduction is correct. But it is only today that I am able to accurately conclude that we will be presented to the influential Duke Han Chuang from the State of Han. This man has an incredible network of friends from high places and is on excellent terms with Second Prince Tian Jian. We cannot hope to defeat him nor escape his evil clutches."

Xiang Shaolong was stupefied: "How did you conclude he is the one?"

Dong Shuzen coldly laughed: "Han Chuang paid Feng Fei a secret visit today and you are probably the only one who is unaware of it. If not for some sort of agreement between Feng Fei and him, why would she meet this pervert privately? His repulsive acts in bed make me want to puke whenever I think about it."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong know that Han Chuang had slept with Dong Shuzen in the past. No wonder he had such a deep impression of her. He gently coaxed: "You can put your mind at ease. I naturally have my ways of resolving this issue."

Dong Shuzen gingerly stared at him for some time before sighing: "This is not a small matter and I will not blindly believe your empty words. Unless there is some way you can prove to me otherwise, I can only depend on myself to find a way out."

Concerned that she may catch a cold, Xiang Shaolong embraced her and lay down underneath the blanket with her. Biting her ear, he declared: "If you are banking your hopes on Zhang Quan, you are only befriending a man-eating tiger. This man has no integrity and his heart is evil. Regarding the details of my methods, unless you bare your soul to me, there will be things I cannot reveal to you."

Misunderstanding his intention, Dong Shuzen hugged him zealously and kissed: "I can do whatever your heart desires." At the same time, she reached out her hand and began stroking his back.

Xiang Shaolong almost exhausted his willpower and halted: "That is not what I meant. I want you to tell me all the vested relationships you have with Zhang Quan or any other individuals, as well as all related events."

Dong Shuzen stopped teasing him and made a big frown: "But how should I know if you are a die-hard loyalist of

Mistress (Feng Fei)? Frankly speaking, my wealth is secondary to hers. In terms of looks, I lose out by an even greater margin. And you are not the least interested in my body. How can I have the confidence to align your interests with mine?"

Xiang Shaolong challenged: "I thought you said you know what kind of person I am?"

Dong Shuzen bitterly laughed: "But you have always been very aloof towards me!"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely pledged: "Things have changed. In actual fact, I never had the intention to deceive you. For a long time I already knew about Zhang Quan's relationship with you but I want you to personally confess to me about it to prove your authenticity."

Dong Shuzen divulged: "Fine. I did spend a few nights with him before. He is a fairly resourceful man and even Mistress is afraid of him to some extent. He wanted me to make a copy of Mistress's (Feng Fei) latest two songs and he would arrange for me to stay in Qi instead of being sent to Han."

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted: "What!"

He instantaneously inferred that the song sheets would eventually fall into the hands of Tian Dan because Lan Gongyuan is working for him.

If Lan Gongyuan gets to perform before Feng Fei and uses a similar tune, it would severely disrupt Feng Fei's performance. This is a truly nefarious plan.

Rewarding him with another kiss, Dong Shuzen proudly announced: "You never saw it coming, did you? As long as I can bring harm to Feng Fei, there is nothing I will not do. I will slip away before the performance, teaching her a painful lesson that not all the credits belong to her alone."

Xiang Shaolong got worked up: "Have you given it to Zhang Quan?"

Dong Shuzen commented: "I would not have mentioned it if I had given it to him. There, I have confessed everything to you. Master Shen, what are you giving back in return to appease me?"

Xiang Shaolong finally grasped the devilish methods of these famous courtesans.

Their forte lies in their understanding of the psychology of men. Pretending to be helpless creatures to evoke sympathy and protection, they do not mind using their bodies and their glib tongues to negotiate for assistance. Regardless of whether it is Dong Shuzen or Zhu Xiuzhen, they are masters of their own game.

Dong Shuzen is currently using the tactic of indirect confrontation.

She has assumed that Xiang Shaolong is working for Feng Fei and is delivering a message to Feng Fei through him. If Feng Fei refuses to let her go, Feng Fei will have to face undeniable defeat at the Song & Dance showdown between her and the other two famous courtesans.

Due to her unique talent, she is unafraid of Feng Fei pressuring her into submission.

Zhu Xiuzhen is positively the source of her knowledge regarding Han Chuang's involvement. And Zhu Xiuzhen probably got this piece of news from Sa Li. However, Zhu Xiuzhen chose not to tell him, Xiang Shaolong, about this critical piece of information.

Xiang Shaolong is able to come to these conclusions because he knows about the special relationship between these two ladies.

They are still working together, perfectly matching each other and doing their best to execute the plan from different angles. In the eyes of Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen, they have already assumed that Zongsun Long has successfully bribed Xiang Shaolong, explaining the eventual freeing of their troupe members.

They could not be bothered with Feng Fei's destiny. Zhu Xiuzhen did not ask him about it and Dong Shuzhen used it to indirectly praise him, making him feel good about himself and herself.

Even Feng Fei, who is behaving like she totally trusts him, did not reveal about her meeting with Han Chuang. The most suited phrase to describe her is: Unpredictable with hidden agenda.

With all these thoughts running through his mind, Xiang Shaolong felt that his head is about to explode. He surrendered: "Your candid admission is chilling to my bones.

Ai. Second Mistress, do you know that your words make me feel like leaving here and forgetting about everything for the very first time?"

Dong Shuzen passionately served him another warm kiss and smiled: "Shuzen knows Master Shen is not someone who does not finish what he started."

Xiang Shaolong secretly admitted to her precise judgement. Unexpectedly, he strongly grabbed her waist, nearly spraining it, and icily snorted into her refined ear: "Dong Shuzen, if you continue assuming that I am blindly helping Mistress (Feng Fei) and using these tactics against me, I guarantee that you will regret it for the rest of your life. Do you believe me?"

A frightened Dong Shuzen softly wailed and protested: "I am only pulling a fast one on Mistress. With regards to you; I am only hoping that you will pay more attention to me!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel her body rubbing all over his body like a water snake. He almost lost it and push her slightly away before gently challenging: "If I were Feng Fei and I found out that you have an extra copy of the song and lyrics, I would arrest you and Xiuzhen and conduct a search for the song sheet. The song sheet will surely be found in either of your possession. Do you dare to bet on it?"

Like a startled bird, Dong Shuzen shuddered violently, signaling to Xiang Shaolong that his words have struck her vulnerable spot, which is the secret alliance between her and Zhu Xiuzhen.

All along, Zhu Xiuzhen is using the soft approach while Dong Shuzhen is using the tough-within-soft approach. These approaches are specially formulated to attack Xiang Shaolong's weakness.

If Xiang Shaolong is lacking in willpower, he would have immersed himself in their fantasies and become one of their pawns. By then, it will be beyond redemption.

Fortunately, he had made up his mind earlier to not succumb to their sex traps, allowing him to maintain his present clarity.

It might be possible that the two ladies are working together with Sa Li against Feng Fei and himself.

From the standpoint of Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen, they will cooperate with whoever that they can derive the most benefits from. If Xiang Shaolong had assumed that the ladies genuinely appreciate him, then he will be the greatest fool on earth.

Both of them exchange looks with each other under the dark and dimly lighted surroundings.

After some time, Dong Shuzhen sadly asked: "What makes you think in such a manner?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Why don't you go back and think about it? I will not say anything about the song sheet to Mistress. If you want to threaten her, threaten her directly. One day, when you can place your complete trust in me and stop working together with despicable cads like Zhang Quan,

Sa Li, please come and talk to me. Only then will I do my best to help you and I ask for nothing in return.”

Dong Shuzen tried to dispute further but Xiang Shaolong angrily bellowed: “Get out!”

Two rows of teardrops began to roll down the corner of Dong Shuzen’s eyes. She noiselessly left his bed.

Beyond the bed curtains, Xiang Shaolong saw her covering her milky, jade white body with her clothes and nearly wanted to call her back to his side. Ultimately, he hardened his heart and watch her take her leave.

CHAPTER 11

Clearing All Misunderstanding

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

WHEN Xiang Shaolong woke up, it was already well into the day. In fact, it was Xiao Yuetan who extracted him from his slumber.

By now, Xiang Shaolong enjoys special privileges within the Troupe. After ordering his breakfast to be served to his room, both men sat down to talk and eat intermittently.

After Xiang Shaolong told Xiao Yuetan his story, Xiao Yuetan could not help but wipe off his own sweat, affirming: "It is a blessing that Li Yuan is a man who values your friendship.

Otherwise, it will be curtains for you last night. With Li Yuan's support, the circumstances are now highly favourable. Even if you reveal your identity, the people of Qi dare not offend you and moreover, Li Yuan will not allow it to happen."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed: "Did you gain any new information?"

Xiao Yuetan divulged: "Compared to yours, my job is relatively easy. Grandmaster Zou (Yan) is still alive and is currently residing at Qixia College. The people of Qi worship him like a living deity and if you ever choose to reveal your identity, you should reveal it with his blessings. If Grandmaster Zou informs the King of Qi about the unbearable consequences of your demise, I guarantee that even if someone points a sword at his (King of Qi) throat, he would not dare to harm you."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Let me first meet up with him before we decide what to do next. Can Brother Xiao make the necessary arrangements?"

Xiao Yuetan swore: "You can count on me. I will act on it by today. Lu Buwei is due to arrive this afternoon. I will send my men to put Zhang Quan under strict surveillance. The moment he gets the money will also be his unlucky moment."

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "Do not inflict serious injuries on him. I still need him to indirectly gain knowledge about Lu Buwei's plans."

Xiao Yuetan coldly hissed: "Killing someone like him will only dirty my hands. Shaolong can put your mind at ease."

He laughed: "Do you remember my colleague Zongsun Heji? He happened to be Zongsun Long's nephew and I will seek his assistance in spying on Zongsun Long's strategies. Since young, he has been disgruntled with this uncle of his. Moreover, he is a great admirer of Feng Fei and we can appeal to his sense of justice to help us out. But if Shaolong is willing to come out into the open with your original identity, I am certain that even the powerful and reckless Zongsun Long would not dare to do anything rash. Ai. Now that you are alive and can return to Qin, there is no one who will risk antagonizing you, especially the Three States of Han, Zhao and Wei. Each State wishes for the other States to make a move against you and bear the crime of killing you. What wishful thinking!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement.

Ever since he was on the run, the Three States have combined efforts to hunt and kill himself. Now that the window of opportunity is over and they are seeking peace with Xiao Pan, who, in their right mind, would want to cause trouble for him, Xiang Shaolong. The best thing about this is on the surface; the people of Qi have to put up a show of doing their best to safeguard him, in order to maintain the cordial relationship between Qi and Qin.

In the eyes of the people of Qi, their primary target is their longstanding nemesis Yan, not Qin nor Xiang Shaolong.

With the support of the influential Li Yuan, Xiang Shaolong felt that he can become himself again whenever he chooses to and not live life in constant fear of being discovered.

Xiang Shaolong can gingerly feel his natural outstanding aura revitalizing his body but is slightly reluctant to give up the present role he is playing. He laughed: “Li Yuan is representing Chu, from Han we have Han Chuang and Qin is of course Lu Buwei. Who are the other three representatives from the other three states?”

Xiao Yuetan updated: “Coming from Wei is obviously your old friend Lord Longyang. From Zhao comes Guo Kai. For Yan, Prince Dan dare not make the trip in person but sent his Chief General Xu Yizhe. This man has been promoted and awarded the title of Lord Yangle by the King of Yan.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “It is truly a congregation of old friends. Which is the most famous brothel around here? We should reserve two tables there and hold a gathering for old time’s sake!”

Xiao Yuetan is elated: “Shaolong is finally in the mood to crack jokes!”

In this instance, the sound of knocking can be heard. A maid reported: “Shi Sufang’s Boss Jin is here and wishes to see Manager Shen.”

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise but Xiao Yuetan assured: “He is a bit of a hero to some extent and is definitely not a scum. Shaolong, there is no harm in seeing what he wants.”

After putting the fruit seed underneath his tongue, he proceeded to the front hall to meet Boss Jin.

Boss Jin may have met Xiang Shaolong in Xianyang before but he obviously failed to recognize him. In addition, Xiang Shaolong's speech is now littered with occasional odd stuttering, erasing any potential doubts.

Once the usual pleasantries have been exchanged, both men sat down according to their status as host and guest while serving maids offered hot tea. Using his 'fruit seed voice', Xiang Shaolong stuttered in phases: "I wonder what instructions does Boss Jin have for Little Brother?"

Boss Jin boisterously laughed: "Of course I am here to congratulate Brother Shen on your promotion to Manager. If that fella Zhang Quan is still manager, you will never catch me alive in this place."

Xiang Shaolong is not the least bit surprised because Zhang Quan is indeed a detestable *****. But Boss Jin is someone who is exposed to worldly affairs and by right; he would not speak badly of someone in such a straightforward manner. For him to make this comment, his real intention is to test Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed in return: "I pray that in the future, I, Shen Liang, will not be the reason for Boss Jin to ignore us."

Boss Jin leaned over slightly and whispered: "There are rumours flying all over, prophesizing that Miss Feng will

retire back to her hometown after her Lin Zi tour. I wonder if the rumour is true?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "How do you expect me to answer you? Are you forcing me to lie to you?"

Boss Jin is greatly pleased: "I got it. I specially paid you a visit because I wanted to arrange a meeting between Sufang and Miss Feng. Sufang has always admired Miss Feng's talent."

Xiang Shaolong accepted: "Although I cannot decide for my Mistress, I do not foresee any problems with the appointment. Can Boss tell me what is a good time to meet?"

Boss Jin proposed: "Let's meet again this afternoon. It would be better if we are both around during the meeting."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong raised a red flag, knowing that it will not be an ordinary conversation. Otherwise, Boss Jin need not be around.

Although Boss Jin shares the same status as him, which is the post of a Troupe General Manager, in reality, their standing is worlds apart.

After all, he is the owner of the Troupe. Although Shi Sufang enjoys more prestige than him, she is legally just the leading female actress under his banner. On the other hand, he, Xiang Shaolong, is just a highly ranked runner.

Boss Jin is only being polite when he asks for Xiang Shaolong to be present as well.

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged: "I got your point. However, can Boss reveal some traces of the discussion topic? It will be easier for me talk to my Mistress."

Boss Jin nodded: "I will have to trouble you to tell Miss Feng that somebody is plotting to win the Song & Dance competition at all costs."

Recalling the Soft-Boned Beauty Lan Gongyuan, Xiang Shaolong immediately understood his point: "I got it. I will inform Mistress right away."

Boss Jin cheerfully bade farewell and took his leave.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to look for Xiao Yuetan first but he has already left his room. Zhang Quan intercepted him once again and began badgering him with questions but Xiang Shaolong dismissed him with vague answers before excusing himself and headed to Feng Fei's building.

Feng Fei and her fellow performers are busy rehearsing in the inner hall and Dong Shuzhen, Zhu Xiuzhen appeared to be slightly haggard. Xiang Shaolong believed that after leaving his room, Dong Shuzhen probably went to look for Zhu Xiuzhen to discuss the latest developments. It is likely that they even engaged in lesbian 5ex, explaining their present lethargy.

Noticing his arrival, Little Ping'er intentionally hid at a corner, refusing to face him.

Alternatively, Xinyue is batting her eyes at him seductively, as if she is hinting him to make love to her. The attitude of

the other courtesans has improved significantly, signifying the newfound respect he has gained after last night's episode.

Feng Fei happened to be giving instructions to Yun Niang and her musicians. Noting Xiang Shaolong's presence, she gracefully sashayed to his side, questioning in a low voice: "What does Boss Jin wants with you?"

After Xiang Shaolong told her the details, he plainly asked in return: "What does Han Chuang wants with you?" From the corner of his eye, he observed that everyone, especially Dong Shuzen, is secretly paying attention to the two of them.

Feng Fei unhappily complained: "The things that you are interfering with seems to be increasing every time I talk to you."

Annoyed, Xiang Shaolong coldly retaliated: "My ability to interfere lies in the hands of Mistress (you). If you would kindly give the order, I will pack my belongings and sleep in the streets tonight."

Giving him an icy stare, Feng Fei scorned: "With the likes of Xie Ziyuan and Li Yuan looking after your well-being, does Master Shen need to resort to sleeping in the streets?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that in her heart, she is actually afraid that he will desert her. Softening his tone, he apologized: "It is my fault for using such strong language but it is natural for me to be upset after realizing that you are hiding things from me."

Dazed, Feng Fei wailed: "You are behaving as if you are my husband. Why should I report everything to you?"

It is Xiang Shaolong's turn to feel bad for his overbearing behavior.

Logically, Feng Fei does not need to notify him about her meetings.

The problem lies with the fact that this meeting with Han Chuang has implications on the future of Dong Shuzen and the courtesans, attracting his attention.

It is basically a matter of perception.

Xiang Shaolong helplessly surrendered: "All right. In the future, I will not poke my nose into your businesses."

After a short spell of silence, Feng Fei lamented: "Why are the two of us quarrelling the first thing in the morning?"

Xiang Shaolong replied without thinking: "It is because we care a lot about each other."

Feng Fei's body quivered in realization. The family warrior on sentry duty sang out: "Lord Longyang of Wei is here!"

Just as Xiang Shaolong can feel his head numbing, Feng Fei gladly commanded: "Invite the Lord in at once!"

Observing Feng Fei's outlook, Xiang Shaolong is certain that she is on intimate terms with Lord Longyang.

Lord Longyang is probably the only 'man' Feng Fei need not worry about that is lusting after herself.

There is no way Xiang Shaolong can hide as Lord Longyang stepped into the inner hall under a heavy escort of family warriors.

Everybody including Feng Fei, her courtesans, musicians and serving maids half-kneel, half bow to welcome this influential person from Wei.

Only Xiang Shaolong is unwilling to kneel or bow down.

When Lord Longyang first laid his eyes on him, he trembled violently and was stunned on the spot, unable to believe his very own eyes.

Feng Fei and the rest of the crowd were flabbergasted.

Letting out a long laugh, Xiang Shaolong put his fists together and greeted: "How are you doing my Lord? I can still remember the times when I, Shen Liang, was serving Prince Wuji as a family warrior and I have had the honour of drinking and chatting with Your Lordship until the wee hours. Time really flies, evoking countless emotions. Those who are meant to depart have departed. Those who are meant to die are dead. Shen Liang has nearly forgotten about the past (when you betrayed me)."

With a flash of embarrassment across his face, Lord Longyang respectfully returned his greetings: "Even though Brother Shen is willing to let go of the past, Lordship (I) will never forget what happened. Regarding Prince Wuji's demise, Lordship (I) is forced by circumstances to act. After the deed is done, I even contemplated suicide. Aye. I do not know what to say next."

Making use of Prince Xinling, Wei Wuji's episode, both men have resolved this mental burden, with one party expressing forgiveness and the other party admitting to the mistake and begging for pardon. Except for Lord Longyang's expert swordsman cum bodyguard Jiaoxi who is familiar with Xiang Shaolong, everyone else is in a state of confusion, not knowing if they had inferred their conversation correctly or incorrectly.

Feng Fei and her Troupe members are still greatly astonished, finally realizing that Shen Liang is such a reputable and prominent person. On the other hand, Lord Longyang's subordinates are still feeling perplexed, unable to comprehend Lord Longyang contradiction. When their master got rid of Prince Xinling, he even threw a banquet to celebrate the event but right now, he is expressing deep regrets over the same incident.

It is amazing how things eventually work out.

Feng Fei straightened her body and merrily smiled: "Your Lordship and my manager Mister Shen are old friends. How wonderful!"

Xiang Shaolong did a quick scan of the crowd. From Feng Fei to Little Ping'er, everyone is wearing a funny expression on his or her face. He instantaneously felt awkward and wronged, conscious that everyone is suspecting that Lord Longyang shares a gay relationship with him.

The crucial point is that he has never proven to any of the ladies that he is 'a normal man', but has proven himself on

several occasions to be 'abnormal', leading to such an ambiguous scenario.

The most conspicuous look of astonishment is exhibited on the face of Little Ping'er, as if she had suddenly found the answer to her problems, causing Xiang Shaolong further embarrassment.

He could never imagine himself being caught in a situation such as this.

His demeanor significantly relaxed, Lord Longyang came forward and announced to the courtesans: "Dear ladies, do not allow Lordship's (my) presence to affect your rehearsal. Please treat me like an ordinary spectator."

Dong Shuzen viciously shot Xiang Shaolong a glare before resuming the dance practice with the other courtesans.

Coming to Xiang Shaolong's front, Lord Longyang firstly reached out his hand to grip Xiang Shaolong's hand tightly before releasing his grasp and faced Feng Fei, assuring: "With Brother Shen assisting Miss Feng, all your problems will certainly be solved."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, finally realizing that Lord Longyang is Feng Fei's actual protector. Han Chuang is just another pawn of hers. If he were in Feng Fei's shoes, he too, would rather place his trust in Lord Longyang than the lustful Han Chuang.

Moreover, if Feng Fei wishes to travel to Xianyang to rendezvous with her mystery lover, it would be ideal to seek

protection from influential people from Wei and Han. Besides, Lord Longyang has the authority to keep an eye on Han Chuang.

Feng Fei shivered slightly, gazing at Xiang Shaolong first, followed by Lord Longyang, behaving as if she did not understand the meaning of Lord Longyang's words. She whispered: "Has Your Lordship seen Duke Han?"

Xiang Shaolong recognizes that she is implicitly asking Lord Longyang if he has been updated about the latest developments: Lu Buwei's involvement. As anticipated, Lord Longyang guaranteed: "Of course I have and I am aware of Miss's concerns. With this bright strategist Brother Shen guiding you, Lu Buwei will surely be biting off more than he can chew."

Feng Fei's initial state of puzzlement turned into a state of shock and virtually fell into a daze.

Lord Longyang realizes that he was overly excited after receiving Xiang Shaolong's pardon, and as a result, his words are 'too honest' for Feng Fei to stomach. He explained: "As an ex-opponent, I have nothing but respect for Brother Shen's talent and wisdom."

Jiaoxi, who had accompanied Lord Longyang to step forward, grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulder in a brotherly manner, highlighting his admiration of Xiang Shaolong's capabilities and heroic deeds.

After experiencing numerous trials and tribulations, Xiang Shaolong can feel his old emotions surging.

Once again, he visualizes the scene when the Eagle King sacrificed itself for its owner.

Noticing the extreme anguish glowing from his piercing eyes, Feng Fei thought that he is grieving for his ex-owner and her own heart is filled with an indescribable feeling.

Taking a look at the rehearsing courtesans, Lord Longyang asked of Feng Fei: "Lordship (I) wish to speak with Brother Shen privately before I come back to you." Feng Fei could not reject his request and acquiesced. Moving to a side room and dismissing all their men, his eyes welled up with hot tears as Lord Longyang pitifully cried: "I am worse than a beast. Shaolong treated me so well and yet I..."

Xiang Shaolong did his best to comfort him and after Lord Longyang recomposed himself slightly, he faced Xiang Shaolong with a pair of red and swollen eyes, recounting: "I told Han Chuang about this matter and he gave me a piece of his mind. He scolded me, saying that on the battlefield, there is no right or wrong but how can I not help you when you are obviously in trouble?"

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: "Why did you tell Han Chuang this secret? You believe he can be trusted?"

Lord Longyang was guilt-ridden: "Keeping the secret to myself is unbearable. I would rather someone scold and blame me as a way of atoning for my sin. For me, besides Shaolong, hey, besides Shaolong, he is the only person I can confide in. He cannot do without me just yet as I am assisting him with several matters."

Never in his dreams would he imagine Han Chuang to be such a loyal friend but he dared not voice it out, fearing that it would hurt Lord Longyang's feelings. He requested: "In this case, can you kindly inform him about my present status, because I will need to ask him to show mercy in releasing Dong Shuzen and the other girls from his control."

Lord Longyang seems to know about the agreement between Feng Fei and Han Chuang. He nodded in agreement: "Besides guarding yourself against Tian Dan and Lu Buwei, you must not neglect Guo Kai. This cunning bastard brought your strange weapon here to Qi, intending to present it to King Xiang as a birthday gift, scheming to drag Qi down with them. King Xiang is now in a dilemma; if he accepts the gift, he will offend Yingzheng, if he rejects the gift, tongues will wag, saying that he is afraid of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong gnashed his teeth, savagely swearing: "Can you find out the location of my Hundred Battle Sabre? No matter what it takes, I have got to get it back."

Lord Longyang sighed: "Your King (Xiao Pan) has just send a special emissary, warning us, the Three States (Han Zhao Wei) that whoever lays a finger on you will suffer his wrath and revenge at all costs. All of us are frightened into ceasing all efforts in hunting you down. The people of Zhao are the worst hit, losing five cities in succession. Li Mu dared not abandon his camp at Zhongmou while we have suffered a fresh defeat. Thus, we are unable to come to Zhao's aid even if we wanted to. As a result, Guo Kai hates us to the core and during Feng Fei's welcoming banquet last night, he kept

making snide remarks, jeering and insulting Han Chuang and I. His crap attitude is simply intolerable.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “What is Tian Dan’s current standing?”

Lord Longyang summarized: “He still wields considerable influence in Qi and his weakest link is the lousy bum Tian Sheng whom he is supporting to become the Crown Prince of Qi. Tian Sheng is lagging far behind Prince Tian Jian, who is well loved by the people of Qi. This Tian Jian cannot be considered a man of talent but he is adept at using schemes to gather support for himself, unlike the arrogant and self-serving Tian Sheng. Until today, the successor to the throne of Qi remains a mystery.”

Pausing, he awkwardly inquired: “How did Shaolong have the foresight to leave my residence and ended up as Feng Fei’s manager?”

Xiang Shaolong originally did not want to reveal the truth but does not want Lord Longyang to misunderstand him, thinking that he is still bearing grudges. He used a simple reason to satisfy Lord Longyang’s curiosity and obviously did not mention about his trip to the Palace of Wei.

After hearing his explanation and feeling remorseful for some time, Lord Longyang quizzed: “When does Shaolong plan to declare your true identity and openly ask for the return of your precious weapon?”

Xiang Shaolong contemplated: "It may be inappropriate to reveal my true identity for the time being. Let's observe the situation further!"

Lord Longyang warned: "If revealing the truth is not a necessity, I would advise you to keep your identity a secret all the way. There is a local saying here: The Extremists of Qixia, meaning that Qixia students are generally very egoistic, doing whatever they please and looking at others with contempt. It is the same regardless whether they are scholars or warriors. Moreover, Cao Quidao will defend some of his top students against persecution. There are indeed a few of his students who have learnt the essence of his skills and go about creating chaos in Lin Zi. Presently, Shaolong has the reputation of being the top swordsman, only second to Cao Quidao. If word goes out about your presence, it will only invite endless trouble. The King of Qi cannot intervene in private duels and if you happened to be killed in a fair fight, even Yingzheng do not have the right to hold Qi to it."

Xiang Shaolong is definitely not interested in using his fighting abilities to gain fame for himself. He nodded: "Your Lordship is right. Tian Dan, Lu Buwei and even Guo Kai will use this opportunity to incite more chaos. If I get involved with Cao Quidao, I will be just like Lu Buwei, biting off more than I can chew. That will be disastrous."

With a 'Pu Ci' sound, Lord Longyang could not help but break out into a girly giggle. He contentedly voiced: "I can finally

sleep well tonight. Ever since that fateful night, my heart is so painful it seemed to have broken into pieces.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has indeed lost a fair bit of weight over the incident. Showing concern, he vouched: “From the beginning until the end, I have never forgotten about you, my friend.”

Lord Longyang is still reluctant to take his leave and Xiang Shaolong persuaded: “It is not ideal for us to spend too much time talking in private. You should visit Feng Fei on your own while I have to attend to a few of my men who were injured by Zongsun Long.”

Lord Longyang was appalled: “Zongsun Long already made a move?”

Xiang Shaolong went to the extent of repeating the entire story to him. An embarrassed Lord Longyang lamented: “Even Li Yuan is a better friend than me. I am not fit to be human.”

After Xiang Shaolong coaxed him with many kind words did Lord Longyang finally left in an unwilling manner.

CHAPTER 12

Meeting of the Two Courtesans

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

NEXT was riding and archery performance, all were brilliant

Book 22 Chapter 12 Meeting of the Two Courtesans

AMAZINGLY, Feng Fei did not look for Xiang Shaolong after the departure of Lord Longyang. It was only until lunchtime was over before Little Ping'er received her command to summon Xiang Shaolong for a talk.

As he walked behind her towards the inner hall, Little Ping'er who has been ignoring him for the past few days suddenly

remarked with a friendly disposition: "So you prefer males instead of females. Little Ping'er can finally give you up."

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Xiang Shaolong knows that he should not deny it but he cannot don't deny as well. Exhaling a breath, he predicted: "Sister Ping will know the truth one day. But there is something I do not understand. Shouldn't Sister Ping be following Mistress all the way? Why does it seem like... Like... Hey!"

Covering her mouth, Little Ping'er giggled: "Are you implying that I appeared to be looking for someone to settle down with? Frankly speaking, it has never crossed my mind to marry you. I am only annoyed at your condescending behavior. Mistress has advised me that my first time is the most important, and must be given to someone who truly loves me. I naturally do not wish to leave Mistress's service but she had given me the freedom to leave if I choose to."

Suddenly, he was struck by a thought and quizzed: "What if you got yourself pregnant?"

Her face reddening slightly, Little Ping'er chided: "It is none of your business. Furthermore, all troupe members would know how to prevent fertilization. Oh, are you still interested in women? Why are you asking these embarrassing questions?"

Seeing that in the opinion of Little Ping'er, it is a forgone conclusion that he is gay so he kept quiet instead.

The side of the inner hall is still occupied by various instruments but there is nobody else except for Feng Fei.

After Little Ping'er excused herself, Xiang Shaolong sat down alongside Feng Fei, inquiring: "Has Mistress met Shi Sufang before?"

Feng Fei shook her head in an uninterested way, lamenting: "(Boss) Jin Cheng is a real talent, managing the operations, courtesans and clients in an admirable fashion, gaining the respect of one and all. Unfortunately, I am unable to recruit someone as capable as him, otherwise, I need not bear with your nonsense."

Xiang Shaolong prompted: "Mistress is still mad at me?"

Feng Fei lowered her head, chuckling: "Who dares to be angry at you? Even Lord Longyang is full of admiration and respect for you. Moreover, you would hug and kiss me whenever you are in a good mood but will turn around and give me a piece of your mind when you are in a bad mood. Luckily, Feng Fei no longer needs to worry about you needing a companion for the night. Otherwise, it will be a source of insomnia for me."

Deflated like a balloon, Xiang Shaolong mused: "Even you believe that I am gay."

Feng Fei shook her head: "Nope, but this is what everyone else is thinking. Xinyue was so heartbroken she went back to her room in tears. But I am certain you are not adverse to females, because I am speaking from personal experience. I am intentionally teasing you, dying to wipe that silly smile off your face."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "You are really good to me."

Feng Fei admitted: "I can no longer fathom what kind of person you are but since Lord Longyang guarantees your absolute reliability, singing the same tune as Mister Tan, I am willing to conclude that you are a man of your word. Feng Fei will no longer doubt you and wishes to listen to your plans."

Xiang Shaolong plainly advised: "We must resolve our internal issues before we can confront external parties; there is no better way. If Mistress is prepared to delegate complete authority to me, I will firstly commit to getting rid of Zhang Quan, Sa Li and their conspirators. Once we reached Xianyang safely, it will be mission accomplished."

Feng Fei was slightly upset: "You seemed to have forgotten that Lu Buwei wields considerable influence in Xianyang."

Acting surprised, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "Mistress is going for Xiang Shaolong, isn't? What can Lu Buwei do to him?"

Feng Fei knows that she had spilled the wrong beans and shyly lied: "But he is currently engaged in war. I am afraid that Lu Buwei will hunt me down before I get to see him."

Amused, Xiang Shaolong purposely teased her: "That is not an issue. All we need to do is to notify the Wu Family. They will surely offer Mistress protection."

Feng Fei's face has turned completely red: "We must never do that. Nobody knows about our special relationship. Aye. Can we talk about this later?"

Xiang Shaolong decided to let her off this time. Checking the sky, he reminded: "Shi Sufang should be here any minute. I will receive her at the main gate. Does Mistress have other instructions?"

Feng Fei questioned: "Do you have any appointments tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "I have to pay a visit to Xie Ziyuan tonight. What do you have in mind?"

Feng Fei responded: "It is nothing much. I initially wanted you to accompany me to attend a banquet hosted by the King of Qi and Tian Dan. It is a welcoming feast for Lu Buwei and I wanted you to observe him from the side. Forget it."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly grateful for this close shave. Ever since Lord Longyang and Li Yuan saw through his masquerade, he does not have the confidence to face Lu Buwei.

When Xiao Yuetan offered to disguise his appearance, they were not prepared for face-to-face encounters so Xiang Shaolong could not blame him.

Feng Fei meaningfully batted her eyes at him, imploring: "Can you come to my room tonight? I have several matters to consult you."

Knowing that she is finally trusting him, Xiang Shaolong cheerfully left.

Striding out of the main gate, Shi Sufang's convoy of carriages was just arriving. Xiang Shaolong hastily hunched his back and slipped the fruit seed under his tongue before advancing forward to welcome her.

As charming as ever, Shi Sufang dismounted from her carriage in an unhurried manner. Xiang Shaolong and his fellow colleagues from Feng Fei's troupe were in a daze over her worldly beauty. He bowed down to pay his respects to her, not daring to meet her at eye level.

After two maids adjusted her cape, Shi Sufang came up to Xiang Shaolong with Boss Jin by her side.

This beauty did not put on any make up and her hair is bundled to the top of her head before forming a short braid at the back. It is a somewhat casual style, unique to her and matching her aura perfectly.

Under the wind-breaking cape, she wore a coat with a singlet on top. There were shoulder pads on her two shoulders, tied prettily with ribbons. In addition, three thin belts are coiled around her waist, showing off its slenderness and causing her breasts to become more noticeable, enhancing her beauty by several notches.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but secretly praise her intelligence.

In terms of beauty, only Ji Yanran, Qin Qing or Li Yanyan is able to match Feng Fei.

But since Shi Sufang is fully utilizing her strength, which is her individuality, she only appears to be slightly inferior to Feng Fei.

On the surface, it is a friendly meeting between the two ladies but comparisons will inevitably be made.

Shi Sufang appears to be unable to see through Xiang Shaolong's disguise. When Boss Jin introduced the two of them, she only nodded her head as a show of courtesy.

Xiang Shaolong swiftly moved ahead to lead the way.

Boss Jin took two quick steps, walking shoulder to shoulder with him before querying: "I just received news, saying that Brother Shen barged into Zongsun Residence all by yourself, asking for your captured men to be released. Is it really true?"

Xiang Shaolong realized that news really travels fast in Lin Zi and answered: "It is just a lucky break!"

Boss Jin instantly had a better opinion of Xiang Shaolong, raising a thumb up and cautioned: "Now I know why Miss Feng assign Brother Shen such a heavy responsibility. However, Zongsun Long has always been a domineering man. Now that he has lost face, he will certainly get even with you one day. I noticed that Brother Shen did not even have a sword with you. I will get someone to deliver one to you later. Whenever necessary, you can use it to defend

yourself. If you do not accept, you are disregarding Jin Cheng (me) as a friend.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I guess my only choice is to thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Shi Sufang’s pleasant sounding voice advised from behind: “Zongsun Long’s son Zongsun Xuanhua is one of the top four disciples of Mister Wangyou, Cao Qiudao. Mister Shen must be careful.”

Boss Jin painstakingly guided: “I am not aware of Brother Shen’s sword skills but this man has yet to meet his match in Lin Zi and shares equal fame with Tian Dan’s number one swordsman Dan Chu. When Brother Shen face him and is not confident about winning, you can throw down your sword and admit defeat. The swordsmen of Qixia value their reputation and will never attack a declared loser. Hey. Although we are newly acquainted, I am already using such a heavy tone. Brother Shen please do not hold it against me.”

Xiang Shaolong can only feel goodwill for this man. He nodded: “I have yet to express my gratitude for your concern. Why would I hold anything against you?”

Behind him, Shi Sufang was astounded: “I did not expect Mister Shen to be so broadminded, not taking to heart when Master Jin asserted that you are inferior to Zongsun Xuanhua.”

Slightly tensed, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: “Qixia is famous for their swordsmen. I am sure there are many outstanding characters besides the two of them.”

Boss Jin articulated: "The sword practitioners are immeasurable but the cream of the cream are only a handful. Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang are two of them and they love to participate in duels. After Brother Shen's encounter last night, you may have invited more trouble for yourself."

Shi Sufang gently reasoned: "No matter how reckless they are, they would not dare cause trouble here. But if Mister Shen leaves this place, you may be open to their provocation."

Xiang Shaolong appreciated: "Many thanks for Mistress's pointers."

By now, they have arrived at the stairs of the main block where Feng Fei is residing. Feng Fei came out of the door to welcome them and both ladies exchanged a knowing look, wasting no time in scrutinizing each other, capturing every little detail.

Feng Fei sweetly smiled: "I have heard of Junior Sister Shi's fame a long time ago. Today we finally get the chance to meet each other."

After Shi Sufang paid her respects as a junior, she went forward and held Feng Fei's hands, exclaiming: "Senior Sister Feng is giving me too much credit. When I first laid my eyes on Senior Sister Feng, I almost thought you are an angel from heaven!"

With a melodious and ringing titter, Feng Fei hooked arms with Shi Sufang as they stepped into the hall.

Seeing that Boss Jin is still dazzled on the spot like a wooden chicken due to his first encounter with Feng Fei's ultimate magnificence, Xiang Shaolong gave him a slight push, bringing him to his senses and following Xiang Shaolong into the hall.

Feng Fei and Xiang Shaolong sat down on one side while Shi Sufang and Boss Jin sat on the other side as Little Ping'er served tea.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong thought of a crazy theory.

To a certain extent, Lu Buwei's desperate attempts to obtain Feng Fei are due to a hidden competitive nature against Xiang Shaolong specifically.

Ji Yanran is Xiang Shaolong's wife and Lu Buwei's pursuit of Qin Qing has ended in failure. Unless he gets his hands on Feng Fei, he will be inferior to Xiang Shaolong in this aspect. To be honest, even Lu Buwei himself may not be able to perpetuate this reality.

After a round of pleasantries, Shi Sufang humbly sought: "Master Jin has his own point to make but Sufang (I) is sincerely here to learn from Senior Sister Feng, curious to find out what is Senior Sister Feng's secret to making everyone fall head over heels over your performances."

Feng Fei knows that she is just being modest because Shi Sufang herself is another captivating courtesan. Nonetheless, there is some truth in her words. Feng Fei warmly articulated: "Junior Sister need not put me on the high pedestal. We are simply entertainers and everything we

do follow this 16-word motto: Great Song & Dance, White Teeth & Pretty Eyes, Performing according to Segment, Finding one's Niche. Although we are just a display of Song & Dance, at the same time, we are spreading culture and aesthetic appreciation."

Shi Sufang was overjoyed: "Sufang would like to hear about the details of the 16-word motto."

Feng Fei's lovely eyes turned to Xiang Shaolong and plainly invited: "Why don't Manager Shen explain on my behalf?"

Shi Sufang and Boss Jin cannot conceal the surprise on their faces. Feng Fei is known to be proud and aloof; why would she allow a lowly manager to represent her views? Xiang Shaolong obviously knew that Feng Fei is testing him and can only groan inwardly. Currently, the fruit seed is underneath his tongue, so the minute he starts talking, the meticulous Feng Fei will start suspecting that he is afraid of Shi Sufang for certain reasons. He could only stutter: "I just bit my tongue accidentally and it is not convenient for me to speak at length. It is better for Mistress... Hey!" Seeing that the three persons are staring at him with their eyes wide open, he had to stop talking and awkwardly opened his palms skywards.

Looking at him shrugging his shoulders and opening his palms skywards, Shi Sufang was reminded of a similar cheeky body language by someone she had met before but at that point in time, she could not relate it to Xiang Shaolong. She intriguingly remarked: "I did not know that

Mister Shen is a fellow connoisseur. I will seek your guidance next time.”

Boss Jin guffawed: “Even my curiosity is stirred by Mistress (Feng Fei).”

Feng Fei nastily stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment before explaining: “Great Song & Dance, White Teeth & Pretty Eyes refers to the combination of performing talent and a beautiful appearance. They make up the star power of the performer and by utilizing a pleasant and inviting set up, you will attract the audience’s attention and subsequently leave them bedazzled. Junior Sister need not feel inferior to me. You are a success in your own right!”

Shi Sufang shook her head: “Senior Sister Feng is being too polite. Among the Three Famous Courtesans, with regards to beauty, talent, song composition or choreography, anyone you ask will absolutely nominate Senior Sister Feng to be the best. Thus, it is widely acknowledged that you are the leading courtesan. After learning that Senior Sister Feng is planning to retire to your hometown, no matter how difficult it is; I will have to pay Senior Sister Feng a visit and respectfully seek your advice.”

Boss Jin enquired: “May I ask Mistress (Feng Fei) what is the meaning behind Performing according to Segment, Finding one’s Niche?”

Xiang Shaolong first scanned Feng Fei before moving his gaze to Shi Sufang, feasting his eyes on their beauty. He did not

feel tired at all and wished that this exchange can go on for much longer.

He did not expect the difficult-to-get-along Lady of Three Perfections Shi Sufang to behave in a subservient manner in front of Feng Fei. If she is not here to learn a few tricks on the sly, she would be harbouring a hidden agenda.

Nevertheless, Feng Fei is exceptionally quick witted and it will not be easy for Shi Sufang to benefit from her sharing.

Feng Fei simply rationalized: "People on different social levels will exhibit different interests and appreciation. If we are performing in the royal palace, the main concept has to be an auspicious celebration. Before an audience of learned scholars, a less boisterous performance is preferred. It would be ideal to have a performance with deep content, invoking one's afterthoughts. If you are performing to the mass public, you must create a lively atmosphere, emphasizing concepts of love, separation, joy and sorrow, stimulating the viewers' emotions."

Boss Jin slapped the table, sighing: "With these few words, Sufang will benefit to no ends."

Shi Sufang was exhilarated: "An example of Finding one's niche is Senior Sister Feng who created her own brand and unique performing style. Even if someone wishes to copy, one can only copy the context but never the content."

Recalling that Feng Fei challenged the singing norms with her novel singing method, Xiang Shaolong could not help but agree in unison.

Feng Fei was not the least flattered by their praises but plainly queried: "Now that you have heard it all, I wonder what instructions does Boss Jin and Junior Sister have for Feng Fei?"

Boss Jin replied in a serious manner: "I wonder if Mistress has heard of this playboy named Qi Yu?"

Feng Fei frowned: "Yes, I have heard of his name. He is said to be the descendent of an official. Blessed with good looks and the gift of the gab, he has deflowered numerous pitiful girls. Why did Boss Jin bring him up?"

Hearing the name Qi Yu, Xiang Shaolong recalled that this is the man whom Zhao Mu used to seduce Zhao Ya. Now that Zhao Ya has passed on, his heart was firstly struck with grief; but Feng Fei used his proverb: Gift of the Gab, and her face turned slightly red momentarily, indicating that she is thinking of him, causing his heart to be struck by longing.

The two irreconcilable feelings arise at the same time, causing him to experience an indescribable sensation.

Boss Jin continued: "This man is now an active companion of Soft Boned Beauty Lan Gongyuan. Two nights ago, he was extremely drunk at Yiya Brothel, the biggest local brothel, and started to speak in an absurd manner. He predicted that this time round, Lan Gongyuan would be able to outshine Mistress's brilliance, causing Mistress to retire with regrets and hatred. It is a bizarre statement indeed."

This is a good example to highlight Feng Fei's refinement. Despite the threat, her face remains calm and peaceful, only revealing simple signs of deep contemplation.

Shi Sufang softly surmised: "We could not help but feel worried for Senior Sister Feng. He only mentioned Senior Sister Feng's name and not Sufang's (my) name, indicating the possibility of a scheme and the high likelihood of success, inciting our bewilderment."

Hearing these words, Xiang Shaolong was greatly alarmed, deducing that this matter must be linked to the leaking of the song sheet. But logically, the song sheet is still in the possession of Dong Shuzen; why is Qi Yu acting so confident? The more he thought about it, the more he felt that something is not right. Not in the mood to carry on the conversation, he stood up.

The other three individuals looked at him questioningly.

Xiang Shaolong excused himself and left alone in search of Dong Shuzen. The gorgeous beauty was resting in her room when Xiang Shaolong barged right in, dismissed her maids and immediately interrogated: "Where is the song sheet which you secretly copied?"

Dong Shuzen was irritated: "Are you going to force a confession out of me?"

Suppressing his anger, Xiang Shaolong sat down and illustrated: "Qi Yu openly declared that he has a way to make Mistress (Feng Fei) retire with regrets and hatred. If he did

not have the song sheet, why would he make such a wild prophecy?"

Dong Shuzen's face lost some colour but she firmly shook her head: "The song sheet is still here. Aye. I just got it back from Xiuzhen and was prepared to have you burn it!"

Xiang Shaolong demanded: "Then give it to me now!"

Dong Shuzen furiously glared at him for some time before moving to a chest in the corner, retrieving a bamboo tube and throwing it to him in an angry manner.

Xiang Shaolong easily caught the tube and pried the cover off, obtaining a roll of parchment.

Opening the parchment, his face lost all colour. In a horrified tone, he questioned: "Why is it blank?"

This time round, it is Dong Shuzen's face that underwent a drastic change. Petrified and coming to his side, she fearfully shrieked: "Heavens! Who made a switch?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart sinking in. Unless Feng Fei can create a new song within the next ten days before the performance, she will have to resort to singing her old songs. It will be a great letdown as the new song is specially composed to commemorate the birthday of the King of Qi. Her face deathly grey in colour, Dong Shuzen stammered in a trembling voice: "This is impossible. Xiuzhen and I have been extremely careful."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "The only solution now is to be honest with Mistress (Feng Fei) and pray for some form of salvation."

Leaping into his arms, Dong Shuzen was shaking uncontrollably: "Shen Liang, please save me!"

Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen are kneeling in front of Feng Fei, completely crestfallen like inmates on a death row. Until now, they could not comprehend who made the switch and stole the copy of the song sheet.

There is no sign of blood on Feng Fei's delicate face now that her painstaking creation has landed in the hands of Lan Gongyuan. Needless to say, it was a devastating blow to her and she was not in the mood to punish the two ladies.

Xiang Shaolong was depressed too. He suggested: "If Mistress can be the first to perform, it does not matter even if Lan Gongyuan has the song sheet."

Feng Fei shook her head: "It has been agreed that we will be performing the finale item. Moreover, Tian Dan is the organizer and they are out to make things difficult for us. They will not permit the change in order of the performances."

Xiang Shaolong wondered: "Is Mistress able to come up with a new song?"

Feng Fei bitterly laughed: "Unless I can come up with a song within a day, we would not even have the time to rehearse for the song, leading to a lackluster presentation. Aye, it is

hard to guard against internal spies but I guess Feng Fei (I) is partly to be blamed too.”

Hearing her words, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen cried inconsolably and collapsed on the floor.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but feel respect for Feng Fei. Although this beauty has been selfish to some extent, she possesses the magnitude to reflect on her own behavior given the present circumstances. It demonstrates her broadmindedness and empathetic personality.

Feng Fei looked over to Xiang Shaolong with her eyes filled with disappointment. In an amazingly harmonious tone, she lamented: “I would rather refrain from performing than to put up a substandard show. I have committed to using a new song for the birthday celebration and it is inappropriate to recycle an old tune with new lyrics. Looks like I have to fake an illness to excuse myself from this competition.”

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong’s muscular body shook vigorously as his eyes glowed with newfound energy. He proposed in a solemn voice: “I once composed a song and if I try to hum the tune, would it stimulate Mistress’s thinking cap, allowing you to alter it into a new song?”

In actual fact, he is hardly a songwriter but he did frequent Karaoke Lounges back in the 21st Century and there are ten odd songs that he is familiar with. Faced with a desperate situation like this, he wishes to contribute as much as possible.

The tunes of these songs are totally different from ancient tunes but under Feng Fei, this ancient musical talent, it may be convertible to suit the music of this era.

Feng Fei consented: "Let's hear you sing it."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "I cannot sing. I can only hum."

Feng Fei appears to pay little regards to his composition and snapped: "Then let's hear you hum. Aye, you said you have hurt your tongue and yet you are speaking in such a flawless manner now."

Xiang Shaolong is not interested to rebut her and picked the most popular song back in the 21st Century: 'I cannot leave him' and began humming.

His humming skill is deplorable but his rhythm and accuracy of the beats is rather precise.

When he first began humming, Feng Fei thought nothing of it but after Xiang Shaolong awkwardly hummed halfway through the song, her emotions went from keen interest to shock and awe. Even Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen have stopped crying, staring at him with disbelief.

After humming the entire song, Xiang Shaolong pathetically asked Feng Fei as his face turned red: "How is it?"

Dazed like a wooden chicken, Feng Fei stared at him for quite a while before exhaling a breath: "You never fail to surprise me. This is the first time I ever heard such a strange

tone. It is pleasing to the ears but the tone is sorrowful and unsuitable for a festive atmosphere.”

Xiang Shaolong panicked: “I have another song.”

Feng Fei was astounded: “I thought you only composed one song?”

Xiang Shaolong had to confess: “I was uttering rubbish. To be honest, I have composed several songs.”

Touched, Feng Fei nodded as if she suddenly recalled something. Turning to the two ladies, she hissed: “Get out of my sight.”

The two ladies hurriedly took their leave. As they were leaving, the look on their faces for Xiang Shaolong is enough to mesmerize any man for years to come.

Xiang Shaolong chose a fast and upbeat ‘Navy Anthem’ and began humming.

Feng Fei stood up after the second song has ended and threw herself into his arms, embracing him tightly in a bear hug, swearing: “Even if you want Feng Fei’s (my) body, Feng Fei will gladly give it to you. I only ask that you hum all the songs that you have composed. This time round, I will make that thieving Lan Gongyuan suffer a crushing defeat.”

By the time Xiang Shaolong left Feng Fei’s block, he felt like he just woke up from a dream.

He obviously would not take advantage of the situation and make love to Feng Fei. However, he is certain that based on his ten odd songs, he has won her heart.

It is not as if Feng Fei has fallen in love with him but rather Feng Fei is viewing him in the same way he views Li Mu: Nothing but admiration.

Xiang Shaolong may be feeling guilty but his endeavor to assist Feng Fei to defeat Lan Gongyuan is more important than anything else.

He barely left the garden of the main block when he was intercepted by Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen.

Xiang Shaolong had to fulfill his appointment with Xie Ziyuan and comforted them as much as he can with kind words. At the same time, he reminded them not to disturb Feng Fei who is working hard at composing a new song. He instructed: "The two of you should think about who is the third party who knows about the hiding place of the song sheet. We must find out who is the culprit."

Zhu Xiuzhen replied: "Only Zhang Quan knows about it besides us but it is impossible for him to enter my room without my knowledge."

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "He can easily overcome this obstacle by bribing your serving maids."

As Zhu Xiuzhen was feeling guilt-ridden, Xiang Shaolong took this opportunity to take his leave. Arriving at the main hall, the sword as promised by Boss Jin happened to be delivered

at the same time. Pulling out the sword for a look, he can tell that it is a high quality weapon although it is inferior to Bloodwave. The sword felt heavy, which matches his needs and he can feel an increase in goodwill towards Boss Jin as a result.

Xiao Yuetan is right. Boss Jin is a hero in his own ways.

After making arrangements for Feng Fei's dinner appointment to be cancelled, Xiang Shaolong piled on additional clothes and a cap before he left Tingsong Villa.

As the rain and snow fell around him, he noticed that the roads were largely deserted.

Recalling his earlier encounters, he was amused that everyone had the notion that he was unfathomable. His infinite pool of ideas, methods and resources is due to 2000 years of human advancement, paving a way out for him in countless situations.

If he wanted to make love to Feng Fei tonight, she will surely succumb despite some initial resistance but this is something beyond his integrity.

Having some fun with her is one thing but if he goes overboard, he would be a third party breaking up her relationship, which is something he wants to avoid at all costs. Right now, he is on close terms with several beauties and yet maintains a non sexual relationship is surprisingly another source of delight.

When he initially lost the battle and was on the run, he would never imagine himself leading his current lifestyle.

When Feng Fei holds her rehearsals again, it would be necessary to keep it confidential, preventing her valuable intellectual property rights from being pirated. Although he was a pirate too for violating the copyrights of other songwriters, there is no conflict of interest.

Because in the 21st Century, all records of ancient music have been lost.

Thinking on a deeper level, even if Lan Gongyuan gets hold of the new song, she would not have sufficient time to practice. Moreover, Feng Fei can insert other lyrics into the new song and there is nothing Lan Gongyuan can do.

As he thought up till this point, hoof beats sounded behind him.

He did not think too much about it until the hoof beats stopped about ten steps behind him. He instantly increased his sense of alertness.

Next, the quivering sound of a spear can be heard.

His hand grasping the handle of the new sword Boss Jin presented to him, he calmed himself down.

His attacker is a single man on a single horse. By observing the rhythm of the hoof beats, he can tell that his opponent is a seasoned fighter.

The corners of his mouth curving up to form a grin; Xiang Shaolong did not bother to look back. He slowed down his pace and leisurely walk amidst the rain and snow.

As forewarned by Boss Jin, his challenger has finally appeared.

VOLUME 23

CHAPTER 1

She's Married

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIANG SHAOLONG'S mind entered a psychic realm and became as still as water. His footsteps developed into a regular momentum, as if he is marching to an invisible

rhythm. Concurrently, he can accurately sense the speed and distance of his approaching attacker.

Ever since he travelled to this period of the Warring States via the time machine, not a single day goes by without him using a weapon to some extent. As a result, he is acutely familiar with the different types of weapons in this era. Focusing on his hearing abilities, he instantly rejected his earlier hypothesis that his assailant is using a spear. Instead, he concluded that the enemy is wielding a long halberd.

A halberd is a combination weapon, as it can be used to stab like a spear or slash like a sabre. It is a piercing weapon that also allows for a hook attack. Thus, the swishing sound of the weapon is obviously unlike that of a spear.

Xiang Shaolong is dying to turn around and have a look but acknowledges that if he does that, he would fail to deploy his strategy of unpredictability. Moreover, it will only irk his opponent to increase his speed in a fierce assault.

A strong gust of wind came blowing and Xiang Shaolong nearly had to close his eyes because of the snow and rain peppering his face

The resonating of the halberd became muffled against the noisy wind.

Presently, the rider is about seven metres behind him. If the assassin chooses to utilize his full strength, his crushing blow will land on Xiang Shaolong in the blink of an eye.

Out of the blue, like the sound of lightning striking the ground from behind, a voice reverberated: "Shen Liang, prepare to meet your maker!"

Xiang Shaolong instantaneously closed his eyes and took a step to his right, standing in the lane meant for horses and carriages. His right hand released its grip on the sword handle as his left hand simultaneously drew out his sword.

All along, he has been walking slowly on the pavement to the left and was clutching his sword with his right hand. Any potential aggressor attacking from the back would expect him to shift to the left side, increasing the distance between the two of them and using his right hand to draw out his sword to parry any incoming blows. Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong chose to do the exact opposite, stepping to his right onto the vehicle lane, resulting in the enemy's long halberd stabbing in the wrong direction.

A miss is as good as a mile.

Furthermore, this is a life and death situation.

The man cried out in surprise and tried to alter the direction of the attack but it was too late.

Without turning his head back, Xiang Shaolong used a backhand move and stabbed the backside of the horse as it dashed past him.

The warhorse whinnied in pain and wildly sprinted ahead, nearly throwing the rider off.

Watching the single assailant disappear into the snow and rain as if he is running for his life, Xiang Shaolong was greatly humoured.

Winning this battle appears to be easy on the surface but it is requires courage, critical timing and perfect coordination between body movement and footwork.

The sudden gust of wind and snow is a blessing in disguise.

Although Xiang Shaolong himself is slightly blinded, his opponent who is riding against the wind would feel a much greater impact. Otherwise, it would be much more challenging for Xiang Shaolong to execute this strategy.

Returning his sword to its sheath, Xiang Shaolong tunneled through a horizontal alley and walked briskly for quite a distance in the direction towards Xie Residence. He got to his destination within an hour.

Reporting his name to the family warriors guarding the front gate, he was led into the property and told to wait at the external sitting room.

The serving maids were bearing strange expressions on their faces as they scrutinized him and whispered among themselves as if he is an eccentric creature who came out of nowhere.

Under their direct stares, Xiang Shaolong was feeling out of place when Xie Ziyuan suddenly appeared with an ashen face. After dismissing the servants, he sat down beside him and uttered in a soft voice: "This time round, we have picked

a bad timing. Someone has reported to my wife about my visit to the brothel last night. She just threw a tantrum and nearly laid her hand on me. Brother Shen, you must leave while you can. She would not believe our words right now.”

Xiang Shaolong was sympathetic: “In this case, I will look for Brother Xie two days later.”

Pulling him to his feet, Xie Ziyuan hurried: “Quickly!”

As the two men hastily walked towards the main gate, a shrill voice screeched from behind: “Where do you think you are going!”

Xie Ziyuan’s entire body shook once and he froze on the spot as if his acupoints has been blocked. Filled with disbelief, Xiang Shaolong was badly shaken as well and was stunned on the spot.

Accompanied by the sound of her tinkering accessories, Xie Ziyuan’s shrew wife came to the back of both men and coldly laughed: “Where are you going? Do you think I am in the dark about the conspiracy between the two of you?”

She shrieked: “Xie Quan, come here you idiot. I want you to tell me everything that happened last night. EVERYTHING. I guarantee that nothing will happen to you.”

Xie Ziyuan felt like he was struck by lightning for even the last servant loyal to himself has switched sides.

Xie Quan suddenly appeared and kneeled down, confessing in a quivering voice: “Young Master! Your servant was forced to betray you.”

Turning around like robot, Xie Ziyuan looked as if he is going to burst out crying. He declared: "This is wholly my idea and has nothing to do with Brother Shen."

With his back still facing Xie Ziyuan's wife, Xiang Shaolong's heart is intertwined in countless knots, for he recognized the voice of Xie Ziyuan's wife to be Shan Rou whom he once deeply love.

She has finally given up her dream of leading a wandering lifestyle, returning back to her roots, becoming the Mistress of the Xie household and even giving birth to two sons.

His only wish right now is to leave the Xie Residence without looking back so that Shan Rou would never know that he did came by.

He could instinctively understand why Xie Ziyuan loved her and feared her simultaneously. Frankly speaking, that is the 'kick' Shan Rou gives to men.

Until today, he has fond memories of his dalliances with Shan Rou.

He is touched at Xie Ziyuan's gesture of 'brotherhood loyalty' for shouldering all the blame upon himself.

His mind wanted to leave but he could not lift his foot to take a single step.

Turning his attention to Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou scolded: "You are named Shen Liang right? You look so tall and muscular but you are acting like a coward. Do you lack the guts to turn around and face me?"

The crowd of servants began giggling among themselves

Xiang Shaolong calmly pleaded: "Would Mistress Xie please invite everyone else to leave the hall? Shen Liang (I) would like to talk to you privately on behalf of Brother Xie."

Xie Ziyuan swiftly interrupted: "This matter does not concern Brother Shen. Dear wifey, can you let Brother Shen go? If you want to punish someone, let me be the one."

To everyone's astonishment, Shan Rou turned speechless and was fixated on the spot as if her acupoints are blocked.

Xiang Shaolong can feel Shan Rou's piercing gaze on his back and his heart is filled with an indescribable feeling.

As everyone present is in a state of bewilderment, Shan Rou commanded: "Everyone get the hell out of here."

Xie Ziyuan was traumatized: "Does hubby (I) have to leave too?"

Shan Rou shouted: "Hubby my arse, you better be the first to scam!"

In a split second, everyone has cleanly left, leaving only the two of them in the spacious hall.

Shan Rou's excited and fast breathing can be heard from behind as Xiang Shaolong gradually turned his body around. As the four eyes exchanged glances, both parties shuddered as if they were being electrocuted. Shan Rou has put on some weight but is far more enchanting than before.

Shan Rou took two steps towards him and stopped, excruciatingly trying to suppress the urge to throw herself into Xiang Shaolong's arms.

Xiang Shaolong felt as if his throat is entangled. He has so many things to tell her but did not know where to start. Ultimately, he let out a long sigh, shaking his head with a bitter smile and strode towards the main door.

Shan Rou tried to catch up by taking two steps forward, softly calling: "Shaolong!"

Hardening his heart and resisting the urge to reply, Xiang Shaolong strode out of the door.

Over ten pairs of eyes are now focused at him. Regardless whether they are servants or family warriors, every single person's mouth is wide open with surprise that Xiang Shaolong managed to come out of the hall unscathed and with his clothes in a tidy manner.

Xie Ziyuan extracted himself from the crowd and put his hand around Xiang Shaolong's shoulder as he led him towards the main gate. "What did Brother Shen tell her?" He asked excitedly.

Xiang Shaolong spouted nonsense: "Sister in law (polite way to address) is domineering to some extent but she can be quite understanding if you talk to her nicely. I explained to her the simile: The more she oppresses you, the more resistance she can expect in return. For example, if she allows Brother Xie to fool around, I guarantee Brother Xie will grow tired of it after some time."

Xie Ziyuan wondered: "Why would I grow tired of fooling around? What is her reaction?"

Xiang Shaolong lied: "She says she wants to think it over."

Xie Ziyuan was overjoyed: "It is a miraculous 180 degrees turn! Can Brother Shen stay and accompany me for a chat?"

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is feeling depressed as if his intestines are all entangled together. Therefore he is certainly not in the mood for idle chatter. He intentionally threatened: "The first thing you should do now is to obediently spend more time accompanying Sister in Law. Otherwise, she may have the impression that you are still up to no good and would not even consider letting you fool around."

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck and hastily withdrew his hand from Xiang Shaolong's arm. His expression is priceless.

Waving his goodbye, Xiang Shaolong walked to the main road. The sky is filled with falling rain and snow.

He felt lost.

Ever since he came to Lin Zi, he has been trying ways and means to locate Shan Rou. He did not anticipate meeting her under such circumstances and moreover, she is the wife of another man.

Xie Ziyuan should be a good husband. Aye!

In the past, when Mei Canniang got married to another man, he did not undergo any emotional turmoil, as their love has no depth.

But he did love Shan Rou intensely.

He respects Shan Rou's decision. Furthermore, he himself has a fulfilling marriage and a complete family. The only issue is he is now far away in Qi, a foreign territory, and it is easy for feelings of loneliness and the desire for companionship to arise. As a result, he is feeling disheartened as he could not continue his previous relationship with Shan Rou.

As the wind and snow assault his face in a cold and hurting manner, he felt as if he had just woken up from a dream.

After heaving another breath, Xiang Shaolong started making his way back to his accommodation.

Let bygones be bygones!

He sincerely wished Shan Rou happiness and is relieved that she has given up her plan for revenge.

Back at the guesthouse, Xiao Yuetan has been waiting for him for some time. Observing his early return, he was astonished: "I heard your men saying that you would be back late in the night and was about to take my leave. Eek. Why are you wearing such an ugly expression on your face?"

Pulling Xiao Yuetan into his room and after they both sat down, Xiang Shaolong began: "You should have heard of

Shan Rou, right? She is (Zhao Zhi) Zhi Zhi's blood sister and we used to be lovers. She is presently married to Xie Ziyuan."

Xiao Yuetan was stupefied: "Another coincidence!"

Not wishing to dwell on this matter, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic and enquired about Zou Yan. With a puzzled expression, Xiao Yuetan revealed: "Grandmaster Zou has wandered off looking for a suitable burial plot for himself. He hasn't been home for several days."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart throbbing with pain and did not know what to reply to that.

Xiao Yuetan lowered his voice: "Lu Buwei has arrived this afternoon by ship. He is accompanied by Han Jie and Xu Shang."

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: "Isn't Han Jie working for Lao Ai?"

Xiao Yuetan articulated: "From this gesture, we can conclude that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are in cahoots with each other. Han Jie is one of the four top disciples of Qixia Sword Saint. With him paving the way, the swordsmen of Qixia may align themselves with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. This could potentially tip the balance in power."

Pausing for a while, he continued: "Based on Lu Buwei's method of scheming, he would definitely try to give the King of Qi the impression that appointing Tian Jian as the next Crown Prince will be detrimental to the relationship between Qin and Qi. If Cao Quidao were to side with First

Prince Tian Sheng and Tian Dan, it would not be unexpected if Tian Jian is the loser in this power tussle.”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: “Whoever wins or lose is Qi’s internal affairs. My utmost concern is how to assist these beauties of the Song & Dance Troupe to realize their dreams. Lu Buwei can do whatever he wants to.”

Xiao Yuetan was taken aback: “It is indeed rare to see Shaolong so despondent. Don’t you find any meaning in tripping Lu Buwei up? Please have a good night’s rest, for you may change your mindset when you wake up tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Unless I can reappear as Xiang Shaolong, otherwise, it would be impossible to exert influence over the King of Qi. But if I do so, it would be openly inviting Lu Buwei to scheme against myself. Oh! I forgot to tell you. Both Li Yuan and Lord Longyang have seen through my disguise.”

Xiao Yuetan speedily pressed for details and after Xiang Shaolong finished telling his story, Xiao Yuetan gleefully cheered: “In this case, the situation is far from bleak. For the time being, the greatest fear of Qi is an alliance between Chu and the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), suppressing their ambitions towards Yan. As long as Tian Dan do not directly confront you, our job would be much easier!”

Xiang Shaolong was in a dilemma: “Whenever there are gains, some losses would inevitable be incurred. As Xiang Shaolong, Lu Buwei, Tian Dan or even Guo Kai would start to

plot against me. If I continue to masquerade as Shen Liang, I would have to contend against the likes of Zongsun Long as well as the swordsmen of Qi. I am stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

The sound of knocking can be heard. It turned out to be Little Ping'er who is here on Feng Fei's orders, inviting Xiang Shaolong for a meeting. After Xiao Yuetan whispered 'see you tomorrow' and took his leave, Xiang Shaolong followed Little Ping'er to see Feng Fei.

Feng Fei is playing a zither on the second storey of the main block with full concentration, filling the air with subtle, divine music as if it came from the nine heavens itself. Until Xiang Shaolong sat down opposite her, she did not show any signs of knowing that he has arrived.

After Little Ping'er excused herself to the lower floor, Xiang Shaolong half-slouched, half-sat on a soft cushion, feasting his eyes on this beauty's attractiveness and immersing himself in the celestial music. His disenchantment over Shan Rou decreased by about 30%.

Strumming the zither strings, Feng Fei let loose another series of melodies before stopping in an instant. Lifting her pretty head to meet his gaze, she quizzed with her eyes shining: “Does Mister Shen recognise this part?”

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze and shook his head in a flabbergasted manner.

Feng Fei sweetly chirped: "This is a combination of melodies I extracted and edited from snippets of your songs. You ah! How can you miss it?"

Xiang Shaolong awkwardly scratched his head: "I really cannot distinguish my songs from your melodies. Why is this so?"

Feng Fei gently cooed: "I obviously cannot religiously follow your original tune. After several modifications, this is the final outcome! Do you like it?"

This is the first time Feng Fei is cajoling Xiang Shaolong, surprising him. He praised: "Mistress is truly talented. Have you assign new song tunes for the Birthday routine? "

Her lovely eyes gazing at the snowy night outside her window, Feng Fei sighed: "Do you know I just realized that it has been snowing heavily outside? After listening to your bizarre tunes, Feng Fei (I) felt as if I am possessed, churning out one new song after another. It is unbelievably easy."

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic: "My heartiest congratulations to Mistress."

Shifting her gaze back his face, she sharpened her stare and mused: "What kind of man are you, seriously?"

Xiang Shaolong snorted: "I have arms, legs, eyes, ears, a mouth and a nose, just like everybody else."

Feng Fei observed: "But in my eyes, you are like an immortal from heaven, coming down to earth to help those in need. Aye! If immortals truly exist, that would be so wonderful.

There are too many frustrating issues plaguing humans. Sometimes, I would even hate myself.”

After some contemplation, Xiang Shaolong nodded: “It is true that certain things in life are rather annoying but in the eyes of many others, Mistress is regarded as an unreachable sacred being, light years away from themselves. Being able fall beneath your skirt is already an unmatched honour.”

Feng Fei shifted her body to lean on a cushion, giggling: “Your descriptive proverbs are really weird. What is ‘unreachable sacred being, light years, fall beneath my skirt’? Aye! Feng Fei is only an ordinary person too. I only feel superior to others when it comes to creating music and performing.”

Following her statement, she glanced at him with her starry eyes and pleaded: “Would you please stay for the night and accompany me for a night of chit-chatting? Every time I have a new composition, I would have difficulty sleeping and moreover, I usually lack a friend I can confide in.”

Xiang Shaolong had quite a scare at her suggestion and he warily cautioned: “Ultimately, I am a lowly servant. Wouldn’t it invite rumours if I spend the night in Mistress’s bedroom?”

Feng Fei grumbled: “Where was the same display of courage two nights ago? If it was another man in your shoes under the present circumstances, he would not leave even if I try to chase him out.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Ever since I know that Mistress’s secret admirer is Xiang Shaolong, I have become

more and more jittery. In the near future when we arrive at Xianyang and if he learns that I did spend a night in Mistress's bedroom, even if nothing happened between us, my life would be in jeopardy. Mistress, do you agree with me?"

Feng Fei was speechless and did not know how to reply to that.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. This is called: Using your words against yourself. It is indeed preposterous to use her 'Xiang Shaolong' to suppress himself, the authentic 'Xiang Shaolong'.

After some time, Feng Fei lamented: "All along, I have the impression that men are fearless when it concerns matters of the fairer sex. Why are you such a bold character on other issues but is acting like a coward in this field."

Pretending to be surprised, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "Judging from the tone of Mistress, it seems like we would be doing much more than idle chatter by the candlelight."

With a girly chortle 'Pu Ci', Feng Fei enticingly batted her eyes at him, cheerfully stating: "Talking to you is so meaningful. For the longest time, only I, Feng Fei, get to tease other men. To think that now, you are the one teasing me instead. Bring it on!"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "Bring what on?"

Feng Fei's mouth curled up seductively and suggested: "My dear manager, please help me take off my shoes first?"

Xiang Shaolong glanced at her for a short spell and whispered: "Mistress, are you serious about this? Once we start the ball rolling it would be difficult to stop. By then, it would be impossible even if Mistress wants to back out."

He is not kidding. With a beautiful disposition to match Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, together with her strong intention to seduce, even a meditating monk would be tempted by her, not to mention him, Xiang Shaolong.

Out of the blue, the wind and snow outside, coupled with the lantern-covered candle light, on top of the warm feeling from the burning firepot strengthened the already romantic and inviting atmosphere in the room by several times.

Scanning her blossoming beauty, refined brows, seducing aura, protruding breasts and slender waists, the temptation is simply irresistible.

Feng Fei shot him a look, clarifying: "Manager Shen is thinking too much. Before climbing onto my bed and going to sleep, I would need to take off my shoes first. Since Little Ping'er is not around, I shall have to trouble you instead!"

Xiang Shaolong was so angry he nearly burst his arteries. Gnashing his teeth, he shifted forward, using his hand to support her right foot.

Feng Fei let out a surprise wail, frowning: "Manager Shen, can you please be more gentle?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own breathing quickening. Using his left hand to support her foot, his right hand slithered

north, softly caressing her flawless calf, sighing: "A shining example of: as smooth and white as jade."

Feng Fei's body shuddered in response to his touch. Closing her eyes halfway, she lightly approved: "As long as your hand do not move any further up, I don't mind letting you take advantage of me like this. Take it that I am rewarding you for helping me solve this problem."

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated: "Judging from Mistress's words, are you instigating me to progress further?" As he spoke, he vulgarly shifted his hand further up her leg.

As Feng Fei felt Xiang Shaolong's hand slide past her kneecaps, exploring her out-of-bounds thigh, she let out a squeal and pressed down his hand underneath the fabric of her dress.

Xiang Shaolong withdrew his hand in a flash and gingerly took off her two cotton shoes with an official expression. He then proceeded to massage her feet, causing Feng Fei's body to turn into jelly and her pupils began to dilate.

In one swift movement, Xiang Shaolong lifted her in his arms and strode towards her bedroom.

Feng Fei tightly embraced his neck, fragrantly puffing beside his ear, hissing: "You are going to land Feng Fei in hot soup!"

Xiang Shaolong was confused: "How is that possible?"

Feng Fei protested: "If you make me fall in love with you, wouldn't that land me in hot soup?"

Xiang Shaolong came to his senses and secretly gave thanks for this close shave. He should not have a physical relationship with this beauty whose heart belonged to another man. Otherwise, it would only complicate matters and result in unbearable consequences.

After tucking her in, Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and gave her a kiss on the lips before warmly reassuring: "Mistress can put your mind at ease! Whenever I remind myself you are Xiang Shaolong's woman, even if I have ten times more guts, I would not dare to lay a finger on you."

After speaking, he quickly left as if he is running for his life.

CHAPTER 2

Unfinished Love

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

JUST as he left Feng Fei's bedroom, he was intercepted by a subordinate who made the following report: Zhang Quan was ambushed outside the Villa, suffering heavy injuries and is barely alive.

Although Xiang Shaolong knows that Xiao Yuetan is behind this incident, he cannot choose not to attend to him. Outside Zhang Quan's room, he ran into his (Zhang Quan) trusted follower Kun Shan. This scoundrel was enraged: "It must be

the doing of Zongsun Long. Lin Zi is a lawless place, full of outrageous hooligans calling the shots.”

Xiang Shaolong is secretly glad that they are mistaken, saving him the trouble to mislead them. He questioned in a low voice: “How are his injuries?”

Kun Shan responded: “He received a few punches to his head and face. Now, his eyes are puffy and he can barely see while the corner of his lips is bruised and bleeding. It is upsetting to see him in such a condition.”

Completing his answer, he walked away, sighing.

Stepping into the room, Xiang Shaolong was amazed to see Dong Shuzen and two maids tending to Zhang Quan’s wounds.

As per Kun Shan’s description, Zhang Quan’s head is swollen like a pig’s head. It would be impossible for him to face the public in the near future.

This is the vicious strategy employed by Xiao Yuetan, intentionally causing Zhang Quan to lose his usefulness to Lu Buwei, indirectly forcing Lu Buwei to rely on Xiang Shaolong instead.

Sitting by Zhang Quan’s bedside, Dong Shuzen gave Xiang Shaolong a sad look and sighed: “These people are really ruthless. Look! They have beaten Assistant Manager to such a sorry state.”

Zhang Quan groaned: “Is it Brother Shen?”

Recalling the fact that this gorgeous Dong Shuzen did spend a few nights with this ruffian, Xiang Shaolong's heart is brimming with hatred. He faced Dong Shuzen and demanded in an uncouth manner: "All of you need to leave the room for a while. I need to talk to Brother Zhang."

An annoyed Dong Shuzen frowned with her brows knitted together. After dismissing her two maids, she firmly insisted: "What secrets are there that Shuzen has to be kept in the dark about?"

With much difficulty, Zhang Quan begged: "Second Mistress, please excuse yourself for a short while."

Dong Shuzen was taken aback and left unhappily.

It is now Xiang Shaolong's turn to take Dong Shuzen's seat. Lowering his head, he asked in a soft voice: "Brother Zhang, how are you doing?"

His mouth swollen like a pig's lips, Zhang Quan can only mumble his words vaguely: "My body is fine as they only hit my head, forcing me to tell them why did I visit my employer. Of course I refused to tell them anything. Aye! My biggest loss is the sum of money from my employer, which they robbed! The money is actually meant for you."

This clearly demonstrates the brilliance of Xiao Yuetan's stratagem. Not only did Zhang Quan fail to come up with the money to bribe Xiang Shaolong, he cannot go back to see Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong probed: "Who did Brother Zhang went to visit?"

Zhang Quan cautioned: "I cannot tell you yet. Aye! I did not anticipate Zongsun Long's involvement. Presently, every one of our Troupe member is placed under close supervision by his cronies."

Xiang Shaolong is not in mood to chat further and stood up, advising: "Brother Zhang, please have a good rest!"

Pulling his sleeve to restrain him, Zhang Quan anxiously beseeched: "No matter what, you must help me. I will definitely get the money for you as soon as possible."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "What can I do for Brother Zhang?"

Zhang Quan briefed: "Try to become Feng Fei's confidante and find out what is the relationship between Lord Longyang and herself."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "If you were Feng Fei and I am now your confidante, would you tell me your life-changing secrets?"

Zhang Quan replied after much agony: "Feng Fei trusts no one but herself, and that includes Lord Longyang. Moreover, the King of Wei harbours designs on Feng Fei so at the end of the day, she can only rely on you. Do you understand?"

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily shaken before he nodded: "Fine! I shall see what I can do about it. But until I receive my money, Brother Zhang can forget about my collaboration."

Pushing his hand away, he walked out of the room all by himself.

Dong Shuzen was waiting by the door and saw him leaving the room. Dragging him to a pavilion in the garden, she lamented: "Are you still upset with me?"

Xiang Shaolong denied: "Your lowly servant dare not. No matter how Second Mistress tries to scam me or distrusts me, I, a lowly manager, can only submissively follow your commands."

With a 'Pu Ci', Dong Shuzen giggled: "Look at your angry countenance. Shuzen begs your pardon, ok? Aye! I really do not know how to gain your affections. Are you someone who prefer males and not females?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Is every acquaintance of Lord Longyang considered a gay man?"

Pressing her entire body onto Xiang Shaolong and using her exquisite hands to entangle his neck, Dong Shuzen smiled: "There is no use hiding it. Witnessing his coquettish expression when he stares at you and the excitement in his eyes, I am certain that you are his male lover. Unless you are not his partner, he would not react in such a fashion. Now, Shuzen's only hope is that besides men, you are also into women."

Xiang Shaolong was stupefied, thinking that he has reached a dead end and he could never redeem himself from this wrongful grievance. Exerting some strength to give her butt a playful slap, he helplessly pleaded: "You can continue to

evaluate me along those lines. Second Mistress, can you please release me back to my room for a rest?"

Dong Shuzen exaggeratedly cried out in pain and gave him a bear hug. Biting his ear, she hinted: "If you are into other forms of deviant sex, Shuzen is willing to play along."

Xiang Shaolong grabbed her aromatic shoulders and pushed her slightly away before declaring in an official tone: "Your lowly servant has to pass up Second Mistress's kind intentions. Nonetheless, there is something you still do not comprehend: Even if you and Xiuzhen do not sleep with me, I, Shen Liang, would make suitable arrangements for you two and no one will have to end up as a concubine or mistress of the rich and powerful. If there is any falsehood in my words, may I, Shen Liang, die a horrible death."

Dong Shuzen calmed down and hazily eyed him with suspicion for a while. She softly quizzed: "What is in it for you? Are you aware that one wrong move can result in death and disaster? If Feng Fei gets to know that you are out to spoil her plans, she will be the first to come after you."

Xiang Shaolong swore: "You can label me a fool, an idiot or whatever you desire but I have committed myself to make this a reality. All I need is your full obedience and I will definitely come to a solution."

Wriggling her body sensually, Dong Shuzen cajoled: "Are we not obedient?"

Xiang Shaolong counselled: "Your obedience has gone overboard and your obedience is not only limited to me but

also towards Zhang Quan, Sa Li and whoever that is useful to you. This is not the obedience I am looking for. Please go back and give it some thought but time is not on your side. We must make our move immediately after the performance. If you miss the boat, do not blame me for not offering you salvation.”

Her entire body trembling, Dong Shuzhen leaned into his bosom, flustering: “Shen Liang, ah! I am at a complete loss after hearing your words! Can you please tell me clearly what plans do you have for Shuzhen?”

Xiang Shaolong lovingly kissed her charming face and sincerely revealed: “If the two of you are still unwilling to place complete trust and share all your information with me, there is a limit to how much I can assist you. My plan is to promote you to become another famous courtesan to continue Feng Fei’s legacy, allowing her to retire peacefully and living the life she wants to live.”

A frightened Dong Shuzhen pitifully reminded: “This would be an ideal arrangement but how is it possible? Feng Fei regards me as her enemy and would never give her consent. Even if she somehow agrees, it would require the approval of everyone in the troupe. This is an impossible task.”

Xiang Shaolong was full of conviction: “I will settle Feng Fei’s side. But whether can you eventually become another famous courtesan comparable to Feng Fei will have to depend on your own abilities.”

Dong Shuzhen was shocked: “What abilities?”

Xiang Shaolong articulated: "I will convince Feng Fei to allow you to play the role of the main character in one of the Song & Dance routines. As long as you do a good job, I can sing your praises in front of Lord Longyang and other influential figures, persuading them to invite you to perform at their official banquets. Ha! What do you think will happen next?"

Dong Shuzen jolted once and suddenly moved away from him. With a pair of lovely eyes shining with never-seen-before brilliance, she pondered in a throbbing voice: "Can you really convince Feng Fei?"

Stretching his hand out and lifting her pretty head, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously gave her a deep kiss on her lips. Only until she started panting did he release her, promising: "Give me three days and I will get Feng Fei to give you her consent personally. However, Xiuzhen and you must give up all your devious plans. Right now, I need you to go to bed obediently."

Her body turning limp from his kissing and her pupils dilated, Dong Shuzen pestered: "Can I spend the night with you? Shuzen is feeling so horny from your provocation."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling desperate too, secretly cursing himself for stirring her flames of passion. Strengthening his will, he turned her sexy body around and pushed her for ten over steps, reaching the corridor leading to her bedroom, laughing: "Didn't you mentioned I am into males? Go and look for Xiuzhen and tell her about this good news! You must

remember not to let a third person know about this plan; otherwise, it will not come true!”

Finishing, he quickly fled back to his room.

Before he could have his breakfast the next morning, a subordinate came to report that Xie Ziyuan is looking for him. Xiang Shaolong was alarmed, for his greatest fear is Shan Rou telling him about their relationship. If this was the case, it would be really awkward to see him.

Fortunately, Xie Ziyuan is still as friendly as ever when Xiang Shaolong came to meet him in the front sitting hall. After getting him to dismiss the serving maids, Xie Ziyuan excitedly expounded: “Brother Shen is superb. Not only did wifey not give me a hard time last night; she gave me permission to befriend you. She mentioned that with you looking after me, it is all right even if I go out and have a bit of fun. Ah! Brother Shen is truly my best friend and savior!”

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly, knowing that Shan Rou still harbour feelings for himself, resulting in this decision which made Xie Ziyuan deliriously happy.

“Brother Xie need not attend morning court today?” Xiang Shaolong was curious.

Xie Ziyuan answered: “Our great King caught a cold last night so today’s court session has been adjourned. Hey! Is Brother Shen available tonight?”

Noticing that he is as joyful as a dog without a lease, Xiang Shaolong cautioned: "You better be careful for your significant other could be testing you."

Slapping his chest as a sign of guarantee, Xie Ziyuan swore: "My wifey is a woman of her words and will not lie to me. She wants to invite Brother Shen to our humble abode tonight for dinner before allowing us to go out and have fun, giving Little Brother (me) an opportunity to play a good host. Ha!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "You looked as if you can't wait for tonight."

Without the slightest trace of guilt, Xie Ziyuan validated: "Of course. Only when lying in the arms of an unknown lady and breathing in her womanly scent can my creative brain juices start flowing. Aye! You have no idea how much pressure the great King is exerting on me. If I do not come up with the lyrics for Soft Boned Beauty's congratulatory birthday song, I will be in hot soup."

Realizing the genuine motivation behind it all, Xiang Shaolong became agitated: "Over the past two days, did you attend Lan Gongyuan's rehearsal?"

With a pained expression, Xie Ziyuan grieved: "Without an excellent composition, I do not dare to face her. I ran into her lover Qi Yu in the palace yesterday and was at the receiving end of his sarcasms and insults. Fortunately, I was in a good mood or else I would teach him a lesson or two."

As if he suddenly recalled the matter, he rapidly enquired: "What is going on between you and Zongsun Long?"

After Xiang Shaolong cut the story short and explained the chain of events, Xie Ziyuan groaned: "This is bad. Yesterday, he sent someone to probe about our relationship. Not suspecting anything amiss, I truthfully mentioned that we are newly acquainted. Oh. I better speak with him personally. If he is still adamant, I will get the Second Prince to intervene. That will surely force him to yield."

Wanting to keep things simple, Xiang Shaolong assured: "It is not wise to blow up the matter and Brother Xie need not intercede. Even if things go out of hand, I will be able to handle it."

Xie Ziyuan was suspicious: "Does Brother Shen knows about Zongsun Long's incredible influence in Lin Zi? He is more powerful than a Marquis and now that he has suffered at the hands of Brother Shen, he would not give up his quest for revenge so easily."

Xiang Shaolong promised: "Relax! If I do require Brother Xie's assistance, I would not refrain from asking for it!"

Xie Ziyuan affirmed: "In the future, feel free to confide your problems in me. I have to rush back to my official ministry for work; shall I pick you up tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong has nothing to say about that and nodded his head in agreement.

As Xie Ziyuan rose with delight, out of a sudden, the sentry announced: "First Mistress is here!"

Xie Ziyuan had a big shock and welcomed her respectfully with Xiang Shaolong.

Clothed in an ordinary yellow dress adorned with white flowers and decked with a cotton singlet on the outside, Feng Fei lightly stepped into the hall, escorted by a bevy of maids. Xie Ziyuan's eyes started to glow at the sight of her elegance and captivating beauty.

After giving Xiang Shaolong a vicious glare, Feng Fei knitted her brows and frowned at Xie Ziyuan: "What is the matter with Official Xie? It is normal for someone to pass by without entering, but now that Official Xie has passed by and entered, you did not even say hi to Feng Fei? Is Feng Fei someone unworthy of Official's attention?"

Xie Ziyuan is justly worth his weight in gold; prostrating himself to the floor without a moment's hesitation, he narrated: "Miss Feng has wronged me! Ever since I first laid my eyes on Mistress during the palace banquet, my soul has been hooked away by Mistress's charisma. Only today did I finally reclaim my soul and thus, dare not pay another visit to Mistress."

Feng Fei and the maids could not hold back their laughter.

Feeling like a child playing games, Xiang Shaolong put an arm over Xie Ziyuan's shoulder and used the other hand to cover his eyes, pushing him towards the main gate. Towards Feng

Fei, he laughed: "Your servant (I) had better escort Official Xie out."

Feng Fei was laughing vigorously, causing Xiang Shaolong to quickly look away, afraid that he would lose his soul like Xie Ziyuan.

Pushing Xie Ziyuan out of the Villa, he removed his hand covering his eyes.

Xie Ziyuan exhaled a breath: "Such a pristine treasure, such a rare encounter. No wonder Zongsun Long is going all out to obtain her."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "Brother Xie is interested as well?"

Xie Ziyuan solemnly state: "You may not believe my words but every time I reached home, I would cleanly forget about all my external liaisons."

Xiang Shaolong was gratified and commended: "How wonderful. I finally got it! Brother Xie chose to fool around because it is your unique way of getting inspiration to compose music and write lyrics."

Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Only Brother Shen knows me."

After sending Xie Ziyuan off, Xiang Shaolong found Feng Fei waiting in the hall for him to have breakfast together, resembling a wife anticipating to serve her husband, sending chills down his spine.

Dismissing Xiao Ping'er, the beauty interrogated: "When you are around, Xie Ziyuan seems like a totally different person

and appears to be in great spirits. Why is he looking for you?"

Xiang Shaolong intentionally hid the truth from her: "It is boys stuff. It is better for Mistress to be unaware of it."

Feng Fei loudly wailed: "You are becoming more and more insolent. Don't you forget that I can be nasty too."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Please be appeased my Mistress. We are simply going to have some fun at a brothel tonight."

Feng Fei was astounded: "Are all men born cheap and low-class? We have top rated beauties right here and yet you are paying money for those normal looking girls."

Xiang Shaolong was startled: "Is Mistress implying that your servant (I) can kiss you any old how?"

Feng Fei was annoyed: "How dare you speak like this!"

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused: "Mistress must not forget that it was you who said that you are being forced!"

Feng Fei was so angry she nearly wanted to box him but instead calmed herself down, sighing: "Looks like I am the one who has lost my soul to you. Whenever you want me to be happy, Feng Fei must be happy. When you want me to be angry, Feng Fei must be angry. Can you please tell Feng Fei once and for all, what do you want me to do?"

Xiang Shaolong gently remarked: "Of course I want to you obediently listen to my instructions, allowing me to accomplish my dream."

Resuming her icy demeanor, Feng Fei stared at him for a second before softly asking: "Speak!"

In an official tone, Xiang Shaolong enunciated: "My dream is to allow everyone in this Troupe to realize their wishes and ambitions."

Feng Fei sighed: "I am beginning to believe your sincerity but my question is: What makes you think that you, Shen Liang, has the ability to achieve all these? It is not as simple as getting my consent for this issue involves several other parties."

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "The most crucial factor lies with Mistress's approval. I will take care of the other matters."

Feng Fei challenged: "All right! Take it that you have my consent. How are you going to deal with the likes of Han Chuang, Zongsun Long, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong was about to give his reply when a servant came to report that Han Chuang is here.

CHAPTER 3

Rectifying Misjudgments

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

FROM afar, Han Chuang paid his respects to both of them: “My greetings to Miss Feng and Shen Liang!”

Xiang Shaolong instantly loosen up, knowing that Han Chuang came over after learning his whereabouts from Lord Longyang. Thus, he would be mentally prepared to see Xiang Shaolong here and not arouse further doubts about his identity.

Feng Fei was stupefied: “Marquis is an acquaintance of Shen Liang?”

Striding over in huge steps, Han Chuang chuckled: "Years ago in Handan City, Brother Shen assisted me greatly regarding several matters. How can I not recognize him?"

Feng Fei did not show any signs of suspicion and it appears that Xiang Shaolong's standing in her heart has been enormously elevated due to Han Chuang's testimony. She joyfully offered: "Shall Feng Fei (I) excuse herself so that Marquis can have a good catching up with this old friend?"

Of course she is just being polite but to her dismay, Han Chuang vigorously nodded his head: "Miss Feng is truly considerate and hospitable to our needs."

Feng Fei was taken aback because this signifies that Xiang Shaolong is more revered by Han Chuang than herself. But since she had made the offer and could not withdraw her suggestion, Feng Fei retreated from the hall together with her serving maid Little Ping'er.

Sitting down beside Xiang Shaolong, Han Chuang gleefully remarked: "Knowing that Shaolong is safe, I was so happy I could not sleep at all!"

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze after hearing his declaration. All along, he wasn't a fan of Han Chuang and never expected him to place their friendship above his loyalty to his country.

He bitterly laughed: "Do not forget that little brother (I) is still the most wanted man of your esteemed country (Han)!"

Han Chuang sighed with a breath of air: "That is something beyond our control as we all strive to serve our own kings.

For all you know, we may meet in the battlefield once again. However, our countries are not at war now so it is friendship above everything else!"

After a bitter smile, his eyes began to glow with deep gratitude before Han Chuang softly revealed: "In that battle which I lost and was eventually captured, I thought I was destined to die there and then. Unpredictably, Shaolong set me free without the least hesitation. I, Han Chuang, have never been so touched all my life. Right now, even if someone points a sword to threaten me, I would never do anything against Shaolong's interest."

Xiang Shaolong swore in a low voice: "The day of the official coronation of the Crown Prince is the same day I will depart Qin for the wild plains beyond the borders. Therefore, Marquis need not worry about facing me in battle."

Han Chuang was shocked: "Why would Yingzheng release you? Without you, Qin is as good as a body which has lost a limb."

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "This is a pact between me and the Crown Prince. However, you must not be complacent because of my departure. Qin possesses countless valiant generals. Wang Jian, Huan Qi, Meng Wu and Meng Tian are not to be trifled with."

Han Chuang disagreed: "I do not believe there is any general who is as good as you."

Xiang Shaolong recapped: "Lest you forget, Li Mu gave me a thorough trashing and reduced me to a state of desolation."

Han Chuang articulated: "Winning and losing is part and parcel of a military life. Moreover, you were defeated in the most splendid fashion and maintained the strength of your core army. So it can hardly be considered a genuine defeat. After the skirmish, Li Mu and I had a good discussion over it and he expressed his admiration for your war strategies. He originally intended to annihilate your entire army since it is deep in foreign territory but did not expect your faction to put up a fierce resistance in sacrifice. With this dragging him down, he is unable to pursue Teng Yi's main army body before they returned to Zhongmou City, missing this golden opportunity. If he had been successful, we may organize another allied campaign and attack all the way to Xianyang Capital. Aye! The difference between a win and a loss is often determined by a single stratagem."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Going by your reasoning, you should hate me to the core."

Han Chuang awkwardly countered: "Shaolong need not tease me. After all, whatever happened has happened. The fact that I can still stay alive and have a good time now is all due to Shaolong's kindness."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Since we are all comrades, we can dispense with the pleasantries and formalities. I suppose there is more than meets the eye concerning your current trip to Lin Zi."

Han Chuang smiled: "Shaolong knows me best. I personally cannot be bothered with the birthday of the King of Qi.

However, I would never object to a trip to Lin Zi. Have you tried the local Qi girls? They will give you a night to remember.”

Xiang Shaolong was not the least surprised: “You are incorrigible, womanizing wherever you go.”

His face turning red, Han Chuang corrected: “Do not mock me for this is called: Living life to the fullest. In the future when the great Qin army marches east, the first to be eliminated is our State of Han. When that happens, it will be impossible for me to womanize even if I wanted to.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “I am just kidding.”

Han Chuang heaved a sigh of relief: “Frankly speaking, I am fearful of you to a certain extent but in a respectful manner. As a result, you must speak to me in a lenient tone. Otherwise, it would be disastrous if I develop a phobia of womanizing.”

Both men exchanged a look and could not hold it any longer, bursting out in wild laughter, reveling in the sensation of barrier-less brotherhood.

Recalling an issue, Han Chuang brought up: “Did you know that the idiot Guo Kai presented your strange weapon to the King of Qi as a birthday gift, causing a huge dilemma over whether he should accept it or not. Ultimately, somebody suggested a counter strategy where the King of Qi would bestow the weapon upon Cao Quidao and enshrined it in the main hall of Qixia College.”

Xiang Shaolong is itching all over with agony: "I shall steal my Hundred Battle Sabre tonight."

Han Chuang was aghast: "You must never do that. With his maturing years, Cao Cuidao that old fellow has made tremendous advancements upon his already godly sword skills. Shaolong may be an adept sword wielder but it would be inadequate against him."

Xiang Shaolong laughingly jested: "I am going to steal, not going to rob. What is there to fear?"

Still worried as ever, Han Chuang advocated: "After Shaolong make your way back to Qin, you can request Yingzheng to write a letter demanding Qi to return your weapon. I guarantee Qi would obediently follow his instructions. Why should you risk your life at this juncture?"

Xiang Shaolong inquired: "Let me think about it. Hey, it may be good to flex my muscles and see some action. Oh yes, did you have a secret agreement with Feng Fei?"

Han Chuang was awkward: "So you knew about it too. Is there a problem?"

Focusing his gaze on him for a while, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You really do fear me, don't you?"

Han Chuang bitterly laughed: "Even Li Mu is terrified of you, not to mention me. Just tell me what you have in mind! I can never envisage your motives."

Xiang Shaolong probed: "On this occasion when Feng Fei requested for your assistance, what benefits did she promise you?"

Han Chuang sighed: "Originally, it is a fair deal but since Shaolong is intervening, I shall have to painfully surrender my only opportunity to kiss Feng Fei on her lips." Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "What?"

Han Chuang was surprised: "You did not know about it? If I knew you have no idea, I would not have told you about it."

Inside his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing a rising tsunami. Since the beginning, regardless of Dong Shuzen or himself, everyone has been utterly deceived by Feng Fei into believing that Feng Fei will present Dong Shzuen and her fellow courtesans to Han Chuang in return for his assistance. As this arrangement appears logical from all angles, even Xiang Shaolong did not have any doubts about its existence. Only now did he realize that it was a smokescreen by Feng Fei.

Why is she lying? What is the Head of the Three Famous Courtesans really cooking up?

When they first met, Feng Fei disclosed that she has accepted an assassination contract to poison him but decided to give up her attempt. The mastermind behind this assassination could be her secret lover.

He, Xiang Shaolong, has enemies all over the land. He is unable to make a guess from the countless possibilities.

After a long while, Xiang Shaolong inhaled a deep breath to clear his mind before whispering: "What does Feng Fei ask of you?"

Han Chuang divulged: "She needs to hide in one of my villas in Han for about three months. When the public has lost interest in her affairs, she will take her leave."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Does that mean she will leave Lin Zi under your escort?"

Han Chuang confirmed: "Of course. Who would dare to undermine my authority?"

Xiang Shaolong has unearthed another lie of Feng Fei for she did mentioned she would require Xiang Shaolong to assist her in leaving Lin Zi before meeting up with Han Chuang.

What is she trying to accomplish with all these schemes?

Han Chuang sighed: "Aye, we never expected Shaolong to be involved; I guess Lord Longyang and I can only watch helplessly as our missions end in failure!"

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: "The two of you are assisting her while harbouring selfish motives?"

Han Chuang replied in a grieving tone: "She is a rare and exceedingly attractive beauty. Who, in their right minds, would allow her to enter a reclusive life? Aye! In actual fact, Lord Longyang and I had a deal, letting me enjoy her for some time before allowing Lord Longyang to present her to the King of Wei. Presently, this deal is as good as gone, landing Lord Longyang in a predicament."

Xiang Shaolong instead breathed in a mouthful of cool air before enquiring: "Do you know who is Feng Fei's secret lover?"

Han Chuang was mystified: "Her heart has finally found a home? No wonder she became much more appealing and dazzling!"

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: "When did you first notice this change in her?"

After some contemplation, Han Chuang slowly announced: "It should be after her trip to Xianyang."

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table and exclaimed: "In this case, her lover must be someone she met in Xianyang, paving the path for her retiring and marrying mindset. But why did she have to come all the way here before slipping away? Based on her intellect, she should know that no one is reliable, even the two of you."

Han Chuang bitterly laughed: "After hearing your deductions, I am only more confounded than before. How should I proceed from here?"

Xiang Shaolong pondered: "Pretend that you are still in the dark and continue to liaise with her just like before. You must take care not to leak any information. We shall discuss further at a later date."

Han Chuang agreed: "All right. I will now speak briefly with her before leaving. Are you aware of my current lodgings? I

am residing at Tingmei Villa just two blocks away. Feel free to come to me if you need any help.”

When Han Chuang left for the inner courtyard to look for Feng Fei, Xiang Shaolong remained in the hall deep in thought.

Assuming that Feng Fei’s lover is from Xianyang and it is the same guy who instigated her to kill himself, Xiang Shaolong, therefore, it is highly probable that her lover is someone who belongs to Lu Buwei’s organization. But who can it be?

For someone to gain the affections of Feng Fei, he cannot be an ordinary folk. Can it be Guan Zhongxie or even Xu Shang?

On a more insightful level, it doesn’t make sense because if her lover is working for Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei need not go to the extent of bribing Zhang Quan to investigate the identity of her lover.

Additionally, regardless of whether it is Guan Zhongxie or Xu Shang, neither man would abandon his glorious career for Feng Fei.

If her lover is not related to Lu Family, then who can he be?

In the middle of his intense, troubling speculation, Little Ping’er came and invited him to see Feng Fei. He easily concluded that Han Chuang has left before entering Feng Fei’s room on the second storey of the main block. Once Little Ping’er excused herself to the lower floor, the conniving beauty glared unwavering at him with her lovely eyes, interrogating: “It seems like the powerful and

influential men from various states are all your old buddies. This is really baffling, isn't it? Based on your impeccable connections, why were you living in desolation for two years in Daliang and eventually lowering yourself to become an ordinary carriage driver?"

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong was as steady as a rock for Zhang Quan genuinely recruited him from the official stables of Daliang. He plainly state: "It is because they are indeed my friends that I do not wish to implicate them."

Bewildered, Feng Fei pressed on: "What do you mean by that?"

Xiang Shaolong explained in a serious tone: "Guo Kai, the Premier of Zhao, and I are on irreconcilable terms. Moreover, if not for my intricate maneuvers, Great General Lian (Po) may have difficultly leaving Zhao in one piece. Thus, whoever that takes me in is akin to making himself an enemy of Guo Kai."

Stunned for a short spell, Feng Fei slowly remarked: "You are well acquainted with several influential men all over the land but your relationship with them is not clear to me. How do I know I can trust you?"

Xiang Shaolong snapped: "Is there a difference? You had never trusted me."

Her charming face turning frosty, Feng Fei unhappily disputed: "Except for the early stages of knowing you, when did I display any signs of misgiving?"

Hardening his resolve, Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: "Who is Mistress's secret lover?"

Feng Fei was thunderstruck: "Didn't I tell you already?"

His face wearing a cool smirk as his eyes glowed like an icy blizzard, Xiang Shaolong very slowly shook his head, exposing: "That is just a delay tactic you used on me. Otherwise, Mistress would want to go to Zhongmou and not Xianyang."

Upset, Feng Fei rebutted: "Is Manager Shen being too reckless when you assumed my distrust based on this singular point?"

With thoughts running through his mind at the speed of electricity, Xiang Shaolong simply proposed: "Why don't your servant (I) try to guess the identity of Mistress's secret lover, the man whom you are willing to live together with for the rest of your life."

With a composed demeanor, Feng Fei serenely dared: "Your mouth belongs to you. Guess all you want."

Xiang Shaolong is aware that she thinks he would never make the correct guess and to be honest, he had no idea too but is just employing a scare tactic. He laughed: "Does Mistress think it would be a difficult guess?"

Feng Fei shot him a look: "Any more rubbish from you and I will chase you out of my room."

Brimming with confidence, Xiang Shaolong challenged: "Mistress would not bear to do so, for you love to play the

scheming game. With a worthy opponent like myself, you are secretly overjoyed at my presence.”

Feng Fei howled: “How dare you pass this judgment on me!”

Xiang Shaolong was steadfast: “Like spotting glow worms among chicken feed, Mistress need not conceal the obvious. You should know better than anyone whether my words are true or false.”

Feng Fei was in a stupor: “Glow worms in chicken feed? Are there really worms that glow? How clever of you to think of that.”

She continued in a worried tone: “Say it! Do not beat around the bush.”

Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray. Based on your words, it is obvious that Mistress’s secret lover is not Xiang Shaolong.”

Her mouth curling up with disdain, Feng Fei remarked in an ordinary tone: “I am only curious at your crazy ideas. At no time did I acknowledge or deny anything.”

Moving to her back, Xiang Shaolong stretched out his hand, caressing her tender, zero fat abdomen with a small amount of strength, causing Feng Fei to moan in her sweet voice as she collapsed into his arms.

Nibbling her cute ear lobe and deeply inhaling her womanly fragrance, Xiang Shaolong gently revealed: “Your lover is from Qin and not only is he not Xiang Shaolong, he happens to be Xiang Shaolong’s nemesis.”

Feng Fei's petite frame trembled but she insisted: "You have gone over the top. Where is the logic in all these predictions?"

Sticking his own face to her smooth face, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "It is very simple logic. You believed Zhang Quan is in cahoots with me and is using me to relay a message via Zhang Quan to Lu Buwei, causing him to mistakenly assume Xiang Shaolong is your lover."

Feng Fei wondered: "But how did you infer that he is at loggerheads with Xiang Shaolong?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize he has exposed his own shortcoming. In his eagerness to succeed, he has inadvertently disclosed too much of his own knowledge. Only he himself knew about the incident when Feng Fei tried to assassinate him and he obviously could not divulge this piece of information. Frowning his brows, he spouted gibberish: "This news would serve to increase the enmity between Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong. If not for the fact that your lover is Xiang Shaolong's enemy, why would you sabotage him in such a manner?"

Feng Fei whined: "Do not utter nonsense. Firstly, I did not suspect you and Zhang Quan were partners and secondly, my lover is indeed Xiang Shaolong. Aye! I am confused after hearing your analysis. Can we take a break and will you please give me a kiss?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Is Mistress afraid of what I am going to say next?"

Feng Fei viciously struggled and extracted herself from his embrace. Turning her slender body around to face him, she confronted: "Bring it on! I want to hear what other outrageous thoughts that you may have!"

Using a finger to prop up her chin, Xiang Shaolong lightly pecked her lips before smiling: "What remains is an easy guess! In Xianyang, Xiang Shaolong's mortal enemies are Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's organizations. Whoever that can gain the affections of Mistress must hold some standing in society and is likely someone with both brains and brawn. It is neither Lu Buwei nor Lao Ai themselves because otherwise, Mistress need not scheme and lie your way through. Thus, it is as clear as day who our mystery figure is."

With a mixture of fear and shock initially printed on her face, Feng Fei instantaneously recomposed herself. Lowering her head, she conceded: "Please stop your meaningless charade. Feng Fei will definitely do your bidding in the future!"

Xiang Shaolong pressured on: "Finally showing your true colours? Or else you would not be singing a different tune now."

Feng Fei angrily threatened: "These are my heartfelt words; if you don't believe me, get lost."

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong stood up and served another scare: "I know who he is."

Feng Fei tranquilly commented: "I am very tired and I don't care if you know or do not know. I only wish for some peace and quiet right now."

As Xiang Shaolong made his way towards the stairs, he suddenly turned back with his body shaking. Glaring ferociously at Feng Fei, he declared: "He is Han Jie."

Feng Fei was visibly shaken and there was no trace of blood on her face anymore.

CHAPTER 4

Evil Upon One's Door

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

DESPITE Feng Fei's lack of admission, Xiang Shaolong is unwaveringly assured that her lover is Han Jie.

He can visualize Feng Fei getting to know Han Jie in Xianyang and both parties begin to rendezvous with full awareness that Lu Buwei or Lao Ai would surely object to their relationship. The critical factor is Lu Buwei is in cahoots with Lao Ai so even if Lao Ai approves of their relationship, it would still be in jeopardy.

As a result, the couple has decided to reunite in Qi before eloping or executing a similar plan. Since Han Jie is one of Cao Cuidao's top disciples, he can openly travel with Lu Buwei to Qi with good reason.

In this aspect, Xiang Shaolong's role as a troupe manager is absolutely crucial as Feng Fei requires someone to see to her travel arrangements and an appropriate cover up, allowing her to leave Qi unmolested.

Supposing Han Jie is Feng Fei's Prince Charming, the perpetrators behind his assassination must be a joint scheme between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei. For Feng Fei to change her mind, it must be due to her intention to elope with Han Jie. It would be unwise to bear the risk of this murder charge.

Delving deeper, Feng Fei could be acting on Tian Dan's instructions and was given the poisonous ring by Lu Buwei. With a slow acting venom taking his life several days later or a venom that causes blindness, she can safely depart once she completed her assignment.

He may not possess all the fine details but Xiang Shaolong is confident that he has a good grasp of the big picture.

Before he could step out of the front hall, he collided with Xiao Yuetan who had came looking for him. The two men isolated themselves in the quiet eastern chamber.

Xiang Shaolong began: "Is there a way for you to obtain a blueprint of Qixia College?"

Xiao Yuetan was incredulous: "What do you want it for? Cao Cuidao is not to be trifled with."

Xiang Shaolong explained: "I am only going to steal something that rightfully belongs to me. The King of Qi has bestowed my Hundred Battle Sabre to Cao Cuidao and it is now hanging in the main hall of Qixia College."

Xiao Yuetan questioned: "I was about to tell you about it. Who did you get this information from?"

Xiang Shaolong told him everything about Han Chuang's morning visit. Knitting his brows in a giant frown, Xiao Yuetan thought long and hard in complete silence.

He finally warned: "Shaolong must not blame me for being a nag but I know Han Chuang's character very well. He is a greedy pervert and is extremely selfish. To achieve his goals, he can forsake his integrity and morals. Although he owes you a huge debt of gratitude, it makes no difference when it comes to fulfilling his agenda."

Recalling Han Chuang's sincere outlook this morning, Xiang Shaolong found it arduous to agree with Xiao Yuetan's point of view. Nevertheless Xiao Yuetan meant well and momentarily, Xiang Shaolong did not know what to reply.

Doing his best to persuade Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan advised: "Shaolong cannot afford to let your guard down. Presently, you are jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. You are not out of the woods yet. If I were you, I would never trust anyone from the Three States (Han Wei Zhao). Inversely, Li Yuan is much more reliable because at the end

of the day, Chu is not under direct threat from Yingzheng's aggressiveness."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I am alone by myself. It would be awfully easy for Han Chuang or Lord Longyang to take my life."

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: "You are too gullible. Firstly, Han Chuang and company knows that they must remain confidential about your presence. If Qi knows the truth, the King of Qi may welcome you as a VIP and honourably escort you back to Xianyang."

Pausing, he added: "Or he may simply use this opportunity to get rid of you for good and no one will be the wiser."

Xiang Shaolong kept silent.

Xiao Yuetan continued: "Currently, no one would dare to shoulder the responsibility of being your murderer. He who kills you today can expect the Great army of Qin descending on his city gates the next morning. I can assure you this is hardly amusing."

Xiang Shaolong wondered: "If they killed me in secret, who would know about it?"

Xiao Yuetan replied: "At least Li Yuan would know. Han Chuang and Lord Longyang cannot choose to sit idle too."

He added in laughter: "Our Shaolong is not a sitting duck and your sword skills are top notched. If you managed to escape a murderous attempt and coupled with the fact that this is not the territory of the Three States, who would have the

guts to try and take your life a second time round? If I were in their shoes, I would do my best to reduce your suspicions and defenses, thereafter steadily luring you into an inescapable dead end before making my move. Even with your consummate abilities, strength and tricks, it would all be useless as you are ambushed and butchered.”

Though his entire body is breaking out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong is still doubtful and gave a cursory assurance: “I will be careful!”

The objective Xiao Yuetan nodded: “Maybe I have been thinking too much! But it is better to be safe than sorry. Theoretically, Lord Longyang has tried to harm you before and it would be more challenging for him to harden his resolve to repeat this crime. However, a man’s heart is unfathomable. Furthermore, this implicates the survival of one’s country and clan. Shaolong had better give it some serious thought!”

Patting Xiao Yuetan’s shoulder, Xiang Shaolong gratefully thanked: “Now, Senior Brother you is the only man I can place all my trust without any reservations. Feng Fei’s issue has grown in complexity.”

Xiao Yuetan hastily enquired and after Xiang Shaolong revealed his conclusions, Xiao Yuetan mused with his brows locked in a frown: “I do not know Han Jie personally but seeing that he came all the way to Xianyang to seek his fortune, would he be willing to give up his career over a lady?”

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "It is said that Han Jie is a member of the Han Royalty and got acquainted with Lao Ai in Han a long time ago. For someone to be a close friend of Lao Ai, one can hardly expect him to be a man of integrity. If he is out to deceive Feng Fei and does not truly love her, the problem will be bigger than what I imagined."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "As outsiders, it is tough for us to comprehend the truth. Feng Fei is a definitely a beauty who can cause a man to sacrifice everything for her. Why don't Shaolong have a go at her, at least it is better than letting Han Jie obtain her."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "Knowing that her lover is Han Jie, I would be less inclined to get involved with her."

Slamming the table, Xiao Yuetan exclaimed: "I've got it! Feng Fei must have decided to elope to Xianyang and become Han Jie's secret mistress. This matter has been approved by Lao Ai and all they need to do is keep Lu Buwei in the dark."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Feng Fei is really a cunning fox. Back on the ship when I confess to her that Lu Buwei is the mastermind behind Zhang Quan, she pretended to be surprise and desperate, thoroughly misleading me and implicating me in her devious scheme."

Xiao Yuetan disclosed: "I have discovered a piece of information that will only add to your worries. Are you keen to hear about it?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "I am already numb to all these upheavals. It would not affect me much even if I know about it."

Xiao Yuetan went on: "Upon my instructions, Zongsun Heji went looking for Zongsun Long to gather intelligence and he found out that this bloodsucker secretly spread rumours among the wayward students of Qixia, professing that you are proud of your capable swordsmanship and regarded the swordsmen of Qi with contempt. Aye! What a despicable cad. He is afraid of offending Li Yuan or Xie Ziyuan to resort to this underhand, indirect attack."

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders, remarking: "Someone already tried to assault me but he failed miserably. If they wish to attack me in an open manner, there is nothing to be afraid of. Don't tell me Cao Cuidao will personally come for me!"

Xiao Yuetan cautioned: "You must be extra vigilant against Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang. These two men enjoy creating trouble wherever they go and they simply thrive in chaos. In addition, their sword skills are truly amazing."

Before he could complete his sentence, family warrior Fei Chun came to report in a flustered manner: "Manager, bad news, a gang of hostile swordsmen have come barging in, demanding to see nobody but you."

Both men exchanged a look of astonishment, secretly startled at the coincidence.

Xiang Shaolong do not wish for Xiao Yuetan to be embroiled in this troublesome affair and expose their intimate friendship. He insisted on facing this rowdy crowd all by himself.

Since he uncovered Feng Fei's lies from his conversation with Han Chuang this morning, his act of chivalry is being replaced by feelings of disillusionment.

With regards to Han Jie, whose sword skills are comparable with his own, Xiang Shaolong neither adore nor detest him but if he were to label this man, Han Jie is unquestionably a man with dubious morals. Still, Feng Fei has fallen in love with his handsome looks so Feng Fei's standing in his heart has fallen drastically. He may not be interested in Feng Fei but in the end, he would want her to dedicate the rest of her life to someone of good character.

With his new change of heart, he dreams of arranging the future paths of Dong Shuzhen and her fellow courtesans, thereby accomplishing his mission and retiring from the scene. He would head back to Xianyang to reunite with his pretty wives and lovely son, and wait patiently for Xiao Pan's coronation and his showdown between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's organization.

Xiao Yuetan may have pointed out Han Chuang's unreliability but he still holds faith that Han Chuang places their friendship beyond the reach of the dark side.

Until today, he still has the naïve mindset that there is goodness in everyone's heart because he himself is one shining example.

There is no one who abhors war and violence like himself but in these ancient times, it is as common as breathing.

In the midst of his thoughts, Xiang Shaolong crossed the door ledge and took his first step into the main hall of the front courtyard.

Five young Qi swordsmen of uneven height were standing in a single file in the centre of the hall. In the instant he treaded into the hall, he became the single focus of the ten eyeballs.

They were dressed in lavish warrior uniforms and by simply observing their ornate swords; one could tell that they are either the descendants of high ranking officials or the sons of rich businessmen.

Zhang Quan's trusted follower Kun Shan, together with family warriors Feng Liang and Lei Yun'er were wearing an angry expression on their faces as they stood at a side. It is obvious that they are annoyed at these arrogant and overbearing ruffians.

To be honest, Xiang Shaolong is not in the best of moods and would not mind venting his frustration on these men who had volunteered to be his punching bag. He is fully aware that acting out his emotions would only serve to blow the matter out of proportion and eventually lead to

confrontations with the likes of Zongsun Xuanhua, Dan Chu, Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang, all the best fighters of Qi.

From their composure and aura, the five men in front of him are many notches below these accomplished swordsmen.

Nonetheless, he could not appear too subservient. Otherwise, these opponents would take advantage of the situation, causing him to lose his standing in Lin Zi.

Finding a balance among these factors is the true test of his competency.

Among them, the tallest and most burly youngster coldly grunted: "Are you the self-proclaimed Sword without Equal, dog-slave Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong icily snorted and advanced quickly towards them.

The five men were shocked and all their hands move to press down on the hilt of their swords.

Halting suddenly about five feet away from the five men, his keen eyes speedily scanned and memorized the reactions of every one of them before Xiang Shaolong guffawed: "Who is this gentleman here and why did you make two mistakes in a single sentence?"

The lanky and stout youth seems to be the leader of the five men pack. Staring back, he answered in a sharp voice: "Throughout my life, my name is the owner of all my actions and will never change; 'Fast Sword' Nian Chang is the gentleman you are referring to. What mistakes did I make?"

From his tone, Xiang Shaolong knew that he (Nian Chang) has been stifled by his (XSL) own awe-inspiring aura. Secretly tickled, he plainly retorted: "Firstly, I do not think very much of my sword skills and secondly, I am not a dog-slave."

Another shorter and stocky youth jested: "As a servant to the courtesans, who are you but a dog-slave?"

As the other four men began to jeer and howl with laughter, somebody added: "Get your Master to come out and apologise and we will consider letting you off!"

The expressions of Kun Shan, the two family warriors as well as Fei Chun who came in with Xiang Shaolong started turning ugly at the insults. In the same breath, they acknowledge that these men cannot be trifled with and were dejected with helplessness.

With an air of unaffectedness, Xiang Shaolong acted surprised and yelled: "AH! So anyone who is working for somebody else is classified as a dog-slave. Therefore, in Qi, everyone besides the King is a dog-slave too?"

The five men are all brawn and no brains. Dumbfounded, they did not know how to verbally counter him.

His voice turning gentle, Xiang Shaolong saluted: "May I boldly ask the five gentlemen here, who personally told you I boasted about my swordsmanship as being without equal. Can we find this man to corroborate his statement with me? If it turns out to be true, I, Shen Liang, would kowtow to make amends."

The five men glanced at one another speechlessly.

Using this break, Kun Shan interrupted: "Your servant had already told you it must be somebody slandering Manager Shen!"

With an irritated expression, Nian Chang dared: "Since we came all the way here, we cannot leave empty handed. Why don't Manager Shen show us a move or two?"

Xiang Shaolong cackled: "This is easy. My sword skills may not be as good as the five gentlemen but I have some other tricks of my own. Watch it!"

In the middle of his roar, he lifted his left and right arm concurrently, allowing two concealed daggers to smoothly slide into his hands from his sleeves. In the same momentum, he shot out both daggers horizontally to his front, flawlessly and accurately embedding them into the frame of a window. There is no difference in height between the positions of the two daggers.

The faces of everyone present became void of colour, including Kun Shan.

The most challenging part is a simultaneous attack from both hands with deadly speed and accuracy.

Conscious that he has displayed enough prowess to satisfy these clowns, he bowed and paid his respects: "I have errands to run and will not send gentlemen off!" He solemnly turned his back to them and left the hall.

Under the cover of Xiao Yuetan's carriage, Xiang Shaolong left Tingsong Villa and proceeded in search of the 'most reliable' Li Yuan.

Xiao Yuetan praised: "Shaolong understood the psychology of Qi citizens very well, mindful that they value their reputation above all else. After your excellent display, the five kids would surely hide the truth and lied that you apologized to them, causing other troublemakers to lose interest in you."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed: "Zongsun Long is a Qi national too who values his reputation more than anyone else. He will not give up easily."

Xiao Yuetan grinned: "Now that you are getting Li Yuan to intercede, Zongsun Long will have to let you go no matter what happens."

Pausing, he questioned in a low voice: "Do you know that just a while ago, Feng Fei and Little Ping'er were escorted by several of her trusted subordinates out of the Villa through the back door?"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "How did you know?"

Xiao Yuetan responded: "It was Yun Niang who saw it and told me about it."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Are they going to rendezvous with Han Jie? How I wish I can stalk her."

Xiao Yuetan advised: "You are not familiar with Lin Zi and it would be a miracle if no one discovers you."

In this moment, the sound of hoof beats can be heard as several horses tried to catch up to the carriage from the back.

Sticking his head out for a look, Xiang Shaolong saw that it was Boss Jin, Jin Chenjiu chasing him with several of his troupe members. Boss Jin called out: "Manager Shen, please wait up."

Xiao Yuetan commanded the driver to stop the carriage.

Cantering to the side of the carriage window, Boss Jin professed: "Is Manager Shen available for a quick chat?"

Xiang Shaolong would never reject him and nodded his head in consent. To Xiao Yuetan, he whispered: "Senior Brother must remember to get me a map of Qixia College. I will make my way to Li Yuan's residence on my own."

As Xiang Shaolong disembarked from the horse carriage, Boss Jin dismounted from his horse and led him to a nearby wine house. After locating a secluded and quiet corner, he sat down and cautioned: "Brother Shen! Trouble awaits you."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "My troubles are endless as of now. An extra one would not make any difference."

Gesturing a thumbs up, Boss Jin praised: "Brother Shen is a true hero indeed. I, Boss Jin, did not befriend the wrong person."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart warming up: "Boss Jin is the better buddy between the two of us. What is it about?"

Boss Jin explained: "Tian Dan hosted a welcoming banquet for Lu Buwei last night and both Sufang and I were present. Incidentally, I was seated at the same table with a subordinate of Zongsun Long. As we chatted idly, he asked if I knew who you are. Of course I did not tell him the truth about our friendship."

Xiang Shaolong chortled: "Are they issuing a reward for my precious head?"

Laughing raucously, Boss Jin commended: "Brother Shen is really open minded. Things are not so serious yet though. Have you heard of Qixia Sword Meet?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head to indicate his ignorance.

Boss Jin articulated: "On the first day of every month, Qixia College would host a riding and archery jamboree, providing newcomers a platform to showcase their abilities. Today is the 27th. The next Sword Meet is three days later. As usual, they would invite some guests to participate. Hey! It is just a polite way of saying it. In actual fact, they are looking for dueling opponents."

Xiang Shaolong snickered: "If they try to invite me, I would fake an illness to reject the invitation. Don't tell me they can make me attend the Sword Meet by force!"

Boss Jin sighed: "The invitation cards are sent out by the King of Qi. Does Brother Shen have the guts to reject the King's invitation? I heard that Zongsun Xuanhua, the son of Zongsun Long, is infuriated with Brother Shen and has decided to personally teach you a lesson on the dueling

ground. He would not dare to take your life and only wooden swords are used but due to his sword strength, he can easily break one of Brother Shen's legs."

His brows immediately creased into a huge frown. Xiang Shaolong is not concerned about the unbeatable fighter of Lin Zi, Zongsun Xuanhua. He is more concerned that Tian Dan and Lu Buwei may be spectators at the Meet and it would be a miracle if they failed to single him out.

Boss Jin assured in a low voice: "Brother Shen should leave Lin Zi under the cover of the night. I am positive Miss Feng would not bear grudges against you."

Xiang Shaolong is highly motivated for this is a brilliant plan but what about Dong Shuzen and the other ladies? If he left without a care, this episode would surely become a knot in his heart and he will never find peace for the rest of his life.

Boss Jin continued to egg him on: "Zongsun Long's influence is overwhelming such that even high ranking officials and men of influence and stature are terrified of him. Brother Shen can never hope to overcome him."

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air: "My utmost appreciation for Boss's reminder. I may just have a way to manage this situation."

Finishing his sentence, he patted Boss Jin on his shoulder and went in search of Li Yuan.

CHAPTER 5

Touring Cow Mountain

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

LI YUAN is a guest resident at Tingzhu Villa, which is located just two streets away from Tingsong Villa. From this arrangement, one can infer that Feng Fei's status is equivalent to that of a State Chancellor Li Yuan.

Arriving at the Villa entrance, he reported his name Shen Liang to the sentry. Upon hearing his name, the guard came to attention and respectfully saluted: "Good day to you Master Shen, Chancellor has left instructions about your

possible visit. However, Chancellor has just left the Villa. Would Master Shen like to leave a message?"

Xiang Shaolong initially wanted to leave a note asking Li Yuan to come and look for him but rationalize that it is inappropriate given his lowly status. He simply remarked: "I have to trouble Mister to inform Chancellor that I did come by. That's all."

At this juncture, the central gate swung wide open and an elaborate carriage escorted by several riders in the front and back drove out of the residence. As the carriage window curtains are not drawn up, the passenger could not been seen.

As the carriage drew further and further away, Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to inquire about its occupant and began trekking his way home.

The weather was excellent; it was cold but it was a comfortable kind of cool. As Xiang Shaolong strode along the congested and lively streets among other pedestrians and vehicles, his heart, on the other hand, was feeling lonely and solitary.

While he was on the run, all his energy and time is dedicated towards avoiding enemy search teams and related considerations. Although he has entered Lin Zi and is now surrounded by both old and new friends, he was feeling lonesome instead.

He glanced about his surroundings, soaking in the magnificent views of the Qi Capital, deeply experiencing the

meaning of the proverb ‘Surrounded by luxury, feeling sad and lonely’.

Besides Xiao Yuetan, there is no one he could trust.

The most maddening fact is that he did not have any warriors at his personal disposal. Otherwise, he could simply send someone to keep Han Chuang under surveillance and easily determine if Han Chuang would betray him or not. For example, if Han Chuang visits Guo Kai on a regular basis, it would indicate his disloyalty.

The Three States have always been on intimate terms with one another and Guo Kai’s Lady Boss is Han Chuang’s clanswoman Han Jing. If he wants to do something against Xiang Shaolong’s interests, both men would definitely form a partnership. Under those circumstances, even Lord Longyang could not voice his objection.

Their only stumbling block is Li Yuan but whether Li Yuan would risk offending the Three States to protect him is still an unknown fact.

As his mind weighed down with these issues, his senses suddenly tingled with alarm. A single horseman is seen riding towards him from the front and as he got nearer, the rider gazed downwards at him, checking: “How do I address Brother?”

Xiang Shaolong stared at him with astonishment and after confirming that he has never seen this man before in his life, he raised his alertness and quizzed: “What is going on?”

The rider was reasonably polite and smiled: "My Mistress is Lady Qingxiu and I was commanded by her to invite Mister to meet her. As Mistress did not tell me the honourable name of Mister, I had to trouble you for it."

Realizing that the convoy which departed earlier from Tingzhu Villa belongs to Lady Qingxiu, Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: either Li Yuan has told her about his presence in Lin Zi or his disguise is really terrible.

Thus, he gave his name as Shen Liang and accompanied the horseman to meet this beauty who has had an unhappy marriage.

Boarding Lady Qingxiu's carriage that was waiting by the roadside, the beauty who has concealed her gorgeous face behind a few layers of veil greeted in her usual wintery voice: "How are you doing, Great General! Please sit beside Qingxiu."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling disappointed that he did not get to see her face. Additionally, he is conscious that her invitation for him to sit down beside her is not because of intimacy but rather a more convenient way to hold a secret conversation. He hurriedly stabilized his emotions and sat down.

A whiff of womanly fragrance began invading his nose and mind as the carriage move slowly along the busy highway of the ancient capital.

All of a sudden, his loneliness has completely evaporated. As the carriage shook occasionally, causing their shoulders to knock against each other, he could not help but recall the

wonderful and moving time in Daliang when Ji Yanran shared a similar episode with him.

Lady Qingxiu plainly state: "Great General's masquerade is truly brilliant. If not for Qingxiu hearing about Great General's arrival in Lin Zi from Chancellor Li (Yuan), I would not have recognized you."

A relieved Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I certainly hope Chancellor Li would not tell everyone he met that I am here in the State of Qi."

Lady Qingxiu was displeased: "Chancellor Li is not someone who does not know what he is doing. He did not hide the truth from me because after all, Qingxiu is the best friend of Grand Tutor Qin!"

Xiang Shaolong shot his mouth off: "I thought Your Ladyship is not on good terms with Chancellor Lee!"

Looking out of the window through the curtain, Lady Qingxiu kept silent for some time before softly suggesting: "It is snowing again. I wonder what scenery Cow Mountain will offer? Is Great General interested to accompany Qingxiu for a tour of Cow Mountain?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to propose a tour out of the blue and even invited him to accompany her. He stammered: "Cow Mountain?" At the same time, his heart was filled with surprise and shock at her warm hospitality.

The sky began to darken as flakes of snows gently and feebly descended on earth.

Appearing to be in deep contemplation, Lady Qingxiu stared out of the window and gently articulated: "Touring Cow Mountain during the rainy Spring season is widely regarded as the top attraction among the eight top touring locations of Lin Zi. Due to recent deforestation, Cow Mountain is wastefully degenerating into a barren highland. Fortunately, after a bout of tree planting, it is overheard that it has regained its spread of bountiful forestry and seas of greenery. Of course this cannot be seen as it is still winter!"

Xiang Shaolong finally discovered the origin of the saying: As barren as Cow Mountain. He nodded: "Since Your Ladyship is feeling adventurous, I dare not reject your offer."

After instructing the convoy to proceed towards Cow Mountain, Lady Qingxiu enthused with anticipation: "When Qingxiu was young, I did visit Cow Mountain with my late father. It was in March during Spring. There were gushing streams formed by spring water seeping out of crevices of Cow Mountain, materializing into a descending body of water. With mass evaporation, it resembles a combination of rain and mist, giving the impression of a smoky downpour. Till today, the scene is deeply ingrained in my memory."

Listening to her eloquent description and witnessing her graceful aura, Xiang Shaolong was immensely mesmerized. Secretly picturing her face veils to be the smoky rain of Cow Mountain, he was bedazzled at her attractive though blurry face.

Lady Qingxiu continued: "Qingxiu is always perturbed when revisiting past sites of beautiful sceneries. I am deeply fearful that it may become different from what I previously remembered."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Then why are we revisiting this attraction?"

Lady Qingxiu shook her head slowly: "I do not understand too. Maybe it is because I am presently accompanied by the earth-shattering figure Xiang Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong noted: "It appears that I hold certain weightage in the heart of Your Ladyship."

Glancing at him, Lady Qingxiu whispered: "Earlier, when I noticed Great General standing alone outside the Villa gates and comparing it to Great General being at the top of the command chain in Xianyang, I can clearly experience a world of difference between the two and the intense sensation of how things have changed with the times. Finally, I could not bear it and had to stop my carriage to see Great General. Does Great General find me ridiculous?"

Xiang Shaolong was startled: "So Your Ladyship is feeling sympathetic towards me."

Shaking her head, Lady Qingxiu clarified: "It is not sympathy but adoration. Does Great General know that you are in grave danger?"

At this moment, the carriage drove through the city gates and headed towards the south.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I am sure there is a logical explanation behind Your Ladyship's words. Shaolong is all ears."

Lady Qingxiu simply admired: "In my entire life, it is once in a blue moon for Qingxiu to experience anything that matches Great General's nonchalance and indifference about his safety. Even if it is not on the account of Senior Sister Qin, Qingxiu would assist you all the same."

Suppressing his voice to a lower volume, Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Can your bodyguards be trusted?"

Lady Qingxiu assured: "Great General can put your mind at ease! These family warriors have been in my service for over ten years; in addition, they would never have guessed that you are Xiang Shaolong!" After a pause, she leaned in closer and speak with her breath landing on his ear and her veil occasionally rubbing against his face: "Chancellor Li entered the palace yesterday to look for my sister, Lady Ning and was wearing a depressed and pained expression. Only upon my interrogation did he reveal your affairs."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "This is bad. Did he say anything else?"

Lady Qingxiu lamented: "He would never confide the truth to me but I am certain that he truly appreciates and view Great General as his bosom buddy. However, he is the Chancellor and it is more often than not where he has to put aside his personal feelings and put the State's interests above his own. Otherwise, he would not be so troubled."

As if she does not want to get too close to him, Lady Qingxiu suddenly turned her face away, sighing a breath as she gazed out of the window.

Sighing along with her, Xiang Shaolong was speechless for some time. He concluded that when Li Yuan initially saw him, that was his genuine and authentic behavior but in afterthought, reality and practicability would set in. His troubled mind could also be due to Han Chuang giving pressure.

Except for Xiao Yuetan, who else can he trust now?

A word at a time, Lady Qingxiu slowly advised: "If not for the terrible weather, I would recommend Great General to simply depart now that we are outside the city. It will be a good and clean getaway."

Recalling the days when he was critically ill and staggering along the unfamiliar roads of Daliang, Xiang Shaolong was filled with apprehension. He sighed: "I still have some unfinished business. Besides, I would certainly not be a sitting duck even if someone tries to come after me. Aye! Before Your Ladyship's warning, I did anticipate this development."

Lady Qingxiu nodded: "History has long proven Xiang Shaolong to be someone who is able to overcome danger and difficulties. Until now, no one has a clear picture of what is going. Maybe I am just overly worried!" Abruptly, she joyfully pointed to a faraway hill beyond the window and exclaimed: "Look! That is the tomb of Guan Zhong, the

famed Premier who assisted Henggong to acclaimed success and dominance.”

Naturally leaning forward and trailing her far gaze, Xiang Shaolong can only see the mountainous wilderness blanketed with a layer of silver snow and every tree branch laden with snowflakes. It was an absolutely spotless, breath-stopping white wonderland. The snowy landscape seems to have merged with the sky, resulting in no difference between the two.

Not far away a huge mountain stood erected as River Zi and River Nv, the two rivers meandered from east to west. Lined along the river shores were towering, centuries-old pine and birch trees. The backdrop was unbelievable.

Several mountains were connected to the first along the southern direction, forming a series of peaking mountain range. It was a breathtaking sight.

Lady Qingxiu lowered her head, softly remarking: “Great General, you...”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize his own chest is tightly pressed against the side of her shoulder. He awkwardly shifted away and after observing the environment, he perceived: “Without a ship to cross the river, we cannot ascend the mountain and enjoy the fantastic view from above!”

Lady Qingxiu simply decided: “It is time to go back! If I wanted to look for Great General in the future, what should I do?”

Noticing her tone turning chilly, Xiang Shaolong can feel his pride swelling and replied in a low voice: "Your Ladyship has better not get involved in this matter. Life and Death is predetermined. If Heaven does not bless me, Xiang Shaolong, what can I do? Man cannot go against the Will of Heaven."

Lady Qingxiu lightly shuddered: "Man cannot go against the Will of Heaven. Great General is indeed open-minded. I shall not interfere any further."

Back at Tingsong Villa, Xiang Shaolong's mind is still persistently filled with images of Lady Qingxiu.

He could not understand the strong influence she exerts over him. It could be due to her indifferent and cold attitude towards life or her graceful style of cool arrogance that has moved his heart.

Fortunately, he is bristling with alertness at the slightest sign of danger. Using his spare time, he analyzed the layout of Tingsong Villa down to the smallest details in readiness of a swift evacuation in times of peril. Only after retrieving his grappling hooks and ropes and securely fastening them around his waist did he finally steadied his frayed nerves.

Once he settled some routine troupe responsibilities and visited the bedridden but recovering Zhang Quan, he retreated to his own room for a break. Just as he was about to fall asleep, Dong Shuzen came a knocking.

Hugging his blanket, Xiang Shaolong sat up as Dong Shuzhen nestled herself on the side of his bed. She was astonished: "Has Manager Shen caught a cold?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I am as fit as a fiddle and can kill two tigers right now. What is the purpose behind Second Mistress's visit?"

Calming down from her shock, Dong Shuzhen patted her perky bosom, exclaiming: "You gave me a fright!" Shooting him a look, she admonished: "Must I visit you only when I have a purpose? Come! Let me give you a massage. I guarantee you will have a good nap thereafter."

Flipping his body and lying prostrate on his bed, Xiang Shaolong was pleased: "Let me experience the excellent massage skills of Second Mistress."

Dong Shuzhen took off her outer coat and conveniently kicked her cotton shoes away. Sitting on his back, she reached out and grinded his shoulder muscles, revealing in a low voice: "I have discovered the culprit who switched the song sheet."

Without thinking at all, Xiang Shaolong remarked: "It is Little Ning." Little Ning is Zhu Xiuzhen's personal serving maid.

Dong Shuzhen was thrilled: "This time round, Manager Shen is wrong. The criminal is Zhang Quan himself. Little Ning did catch him acting sneakily near her room and found the room to be slightly untidy upon entering but did not think too much about it. She only confessed to this after Xiuzhen's interrogation."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "I do not believe a word of it. It is Little Ning framing Zhang Quan for her own wrongdoing. Ow! This spot is really comfortable. I am going to doze off!"

Dong Shuzen panicked: "Do not doze off yet. Do you have any news regarding the promise you committed to me?"

Xiang Shaolong knows she is asking about the issue of Feng Fei allowing her to sing solo for one of the routines. Distressed, he honestly admitted: "I have not had the opportunity to talk to her about it. Shall I update you tomorrow instead?"

Dong Shuzen prone down and embraced him in a bear hug, biting his ear as she questioned: "I heard that you and Han Chuang go way back and are old buddies. Would you assist him in harming me?"

Xiang Shaolong is not as confident about Han Chuang as before. He bitterly smiled: "We are just acquaintances! And definitely not old buddies as you mentioned. Second Mistress can put your mind at ease. As long as I am still breathing, I would do my best for Second Mistress."

Dong Shuzen shivered once and wondered: "Shen Liang, why are you sounding so negative today? Where has your confidence and willpower disappeared to?"

Xiang Shaolong did a big body flip, pressing her below his body and greedily kissing her tender lips. It was only when she began to moan did he release her, explaining: "Life is unpredictable; no man can be confident about everything in

the future. We can only strive to do our best which is why I require full trust and cooperation from both of you.”

Her pupils dilating as she stared at him, Dong Shuzen’s eyes begin to shine with searing flames of passion as she whispered: “You are not only into men (but women as well).”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “When did I ever admit I am into men?” At the same time, he was becoming highly aroused.

Ever since he reckoned the possibility of betrayal by Han Chuang or the others, his spirits have sunk to unfathomable depths and are at an all time low. He was desperate to indulge in some excitement to distract himself and Dong Shuzen has ‘volunteered’ to provide the excitement he needs.

Maybe it is only through her sexy figure can he forget about all the unhappy events.

Hooking his neck with her arms, Dong Shuzen softly dared: “Words are just empty talk. I need to see some real action to prove that you are into women.”

As his wall of determination came crashing down, Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and was about to taste the lipstick on her lips when someone called out beyond his door: “Master Shen, Official Xie Ziyuan is here and is waiting for you in the main hall.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sense of uneasiness. There are several hours till sunset. Why is Xie Ziyuan so early?

CHAPTER 6

Expired Love

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIE ZIYUAN had a ghastly expression on his face and appears to be in distress. The moment he saw Xiang Shaolong, he began dragging him towards the main entrance, explaining: "Little Brother unexpectedly has something urgent to attend to and may not be able to fetch Brother Shen at the predetermined time. Therefore, I chose to come by much earlier."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Since Brother Xie has an important task at hand, we can simply postpone our activities."

Xie Ziyuan shook his head and apologized: "That would land me in hot soup. Originally, I thought of sending someone to fetch you but felt that was inappropriate after reconsideration. Moreover, it is more convenient this way, as I will be passing by. Once I delivered Brother Shen back to my residence, you'll have to make do without Little Brother for some time."

As the two men stepped out of the main gate, they entered the square where thirty odd family warriors were awaiting their esteemed presence with horses and a carriage.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong witness Xie Ziyuan in such a grand and imposing procession. He was amazed: "Brother Xie is truly awe-inspiring."

Shaking his head, Xie Ziyuan sighed: "It is not my style to take on a high profile but Zongsun Long demanded I do so. Let's speak further in the carriage."

An attendant opened the carriage door and the two men climbed aboard, taking their respective seats. As the carriage drove out of the Villa, Xie Ziyuan sighed with a breath: "Don't be misled by the lively and prosperous appearance of Lin Zi. Behind the scenes, every person can barely fend for themselves and one will never know when trouble will come knocking."

Xiang Shaolong probed in a low voice: "Is Brother Xie referring to the two princes fighting for the throne of Qi?"

Xie Ziyuan was astounded: "I did not expect Brother Shen to know about these insider information."

Xiang Shaolong wondered: "I just have a rough idea about what is going on. Looking at Brother Xie's heavy frown, has something abrupt happened, causing Brother Xie so much anxiety?"

Sighing again, Xie Ziyuan insisted in a deep voice: "For Brother Shen, some things are better left unknown. I shall send Brother Shen to my residence first for a talk with my wife. After meeting Zongsun Long, I shall return back to see Brother Shen. Hey! No matter what, we must definitely have a good time tonight. Brother Shen should be capable of negotiating with my wife, right?"

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh: "I thought Brother Xie has forgotten all about it."

Xie Ziyuan bitterly laughed: "Compared to all previous occasions, Little Brother is most wanting now for a visit to a brothel to de-stress."

Xiang Shaolong is concerned about Shan Rou and his love covers her family, which includes Xie Ziyuan as well. Nonetheless, he is conscious that Xie Ziyuan would not easily reveal the intricacies of the palace infighting to an outsider like himself. His mind thinking at the speed of electricity and grasping the genuine reason, he tested his theory: "Is it Lu Buwei deploying some devious scheme?"

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck: "How did Brother Shen know about this?"

Lowering his voice, Xiang Shaolong clarified: "I did stay in Xianyang for a period of time and was on extremely good terms with the movers and shakers of the Qin Court, leading to my familiarity with Lu Buwei's evil methods, resulting in my calculated guess."

Xie Ziyuan was caught in a daze for a while before reflecting: "Movers and Shakers. This is the first time Little Brother has heard this phrase and after thinking thoroughly, it is such an apt description. Who are the people that Brother Shen is familiar with?"

Xiang Shaolong mentioned the names Li Si, the Lord Changping Brothers and naturally included his own name.

Upon hearing, Xie Ziyuan was left gaping with his mouth wide open and tongue-tied. Exhaling a breath, he observed: "That means Brother Shen is well-acquainted with the loyal subjects of Yingzheng? The best of the lot is Xiang Shaolong. Despite using every trick in the book, Lu Buwei is still unable to trip him up. By the way, Brother Shen, is Yingzheng the son of Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji?"

Xiang Shaolong resolutely affirmed: "Of course not! Otherwise, their relationship would not be so strained. What did Lu Buwei do exactly that has caused Brother Xie so much agony? Did he make some remarks to your Great King?"

Xie Ziyuan is truly a kind soul. Shaking his head, he enlightened: "The affairs which I am involved in are of such

importance that any allusions would result in the extermination of one's clan. Little Brother is afraid of implicating Brother Shen. It is better for Brother Shen to stay out of this."

Xiang Shaolong knows that it would be unkind to press on any further and he secretly swore to prevent anyone from exterminating the household of Shan Rou. However, he is unable to come up with a suitable solution for he is unaware of the whole picture.

Xie Ziyuan changed the topic: "It seems like Feng Fei holds Brother Shen in high regard!"

Remembering the ever-complex relationship between Feng Fei and himself, he plainly muttered a reply. Focusing his attention back to the succession dispute of Qi, he realized that he could not longer ignore this event for it has a direct impact on Shan Rou's household.

Tian Dan and Lu Buwei are professionals when it comes to the scheming game. Faced with opponents like Zongsun Long, Xie Ziyuan and supported by the other States, it is still unclear who will be the final victor.

It would be wonderful if Zou Yan is still around. All this world-famous fortune telling grandmaster has to do is to point to the stars and say a few words to overpower all the persuasion and debating strategies thrown at the King of Qi.

By this time, the carriage has arrived at Xie Residence and Xiang Shaolong disembarked. Without dismounting at all, Xie

Ziyuan rode the same carriage to Zongsun Long's Villa for a secret meeting with their allies.

A maid led Xiang Shaolong into the inner residence to see Shan Rou. Along the way, Xiang Shaolong repeatedly warned himself mentally, reminding himself that Shan Rou has become the wife of another man and there must not be any rekindling of past love. Otherwise, he would be acting against his own conscience.

Shan Rou, without a doubt, is still Shan Rou. Without the slightest display of womanly vulnerability, she expectedly chased all her servants to the side hall before going straight to the point: "Have I become a man-eating tiger after getting married? How dare you flee for your life at the first sight of me? Have you developed a habit of running for your life?"

Continuing with a 'pu ci' giggle, she shot him a look with the aura of a milf, laughing as she panted: "A scoundrel will be a scoundrel wherever he goes. How dare you collaborate with Ziyuan to deceive me? If not for Zhi Zhi's (Zhao Zhi) account, I would have broken both your dog legs."

Witnessing Shan Rou's ferociousness, Xiang Shaolong was instead relieved. Vulgarly taking a seat, he smiled: "Why aren't you bringing me your two white and chubby sons for a look? Little Brother is extremely fond of anyone who resembles Madam Rou. Are they born inherently with fist fighting and leg kicking skills?"

Shan Rou laughed heartily like the shaking of flowers on branches, collapsing onto the floor. She wailed: "How I wish I

can give you a beating right now. Aye! After become the Mistress of the Xie household, it is not easy to find someone who would retaliate physically or verbally. With Master unwilling to duel and coupled with his batch of useless disciples, my hands are really itching.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood: “No wonder Brother Xie is terrified of you.”

Glaring viciously at him, Shan Rou hissed: “Don’t make me sound so frightening. Shall we have a friendly duel using wooden swords?”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “Your Master has four top disciples and I know two of them are Han Jie and Zongsun Xuanhua. Who are the other two?”

With a look of contempt on her face, Shan Rou disparaged: “What four top disciples? I have no idea. I only know Master is most fond of me, Shan Rou. That turtle egg Zongsun Xuanhua is just a cowardly good for nothing. Every time I suggested a friendly exchange, he would make up all sorts of excuses. How I wish I could cut his balls off. Hee!”

Hearing that, Xiang Shaolong could not help but hold his tummy and burst out into laughter. Even though this obstinate beauty has become a mother of two children, she did not lose a single bit of her unique style, satisfying him to a great extent. He took the opportunity to ask: “Does Tian Dan know you have become Madam Xie?”

Shan Rou coldly grunted: “So what if he knows about it. That old crook should prepare a huge prayer session to thank his

ancestors and Heaven that I did not pursue the matter any further. Aye! It is really bizarre. After killing the fake dummy, all the hatred and anger in my heart has dissipated. Although that villain is still alive and kicking, I have long regarded him as a dead man.”

Xiang Shaolong grew solemn: “Shall we talk about something more serious? Are you familiar with Han Jie? What kind of person is he? What is his character like?”

Pouting her cute little mouth, Shan Rou scorned: “What kind of good man would end up as Lao Ai’s partner in crime? He has earned neither my admiration nor respect. However, his sword skills do hold water.”

She suddenly frowned: “Why are you not on your way back to Xianyang? Zhi Zhi must be worried sick.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I ended up here because there was no other way out. Do you think I am here to tour the local sights?”

Shan Rou nodded: “I heard both the roads and the river has been blockaded due to several days of continuous snow storm. One cannot survive without a decent fire stove. When the weather gets better, I will get Ziyuan to send you away!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: “You must never do that. Brother Xie must not know about my real identity. If this matter leaks out, he would be found guilty of deceiving the King.”

Shan Rou proudly declared: "Based on the reputation of the Xie Family, worse come to worse, he would only lose his official post. What's so good about being an official?"

Xiang Shaolong is aware that her hatred and opposition is due to her father holding an official post and eventually facing a clan extermination order. He agreed: "Brother Xie is too kind and gullible! It is not very suitable for someone of his character to thrive in officialdom."

Shan Rou chuckled: "Neither you nor him are good people anyway; forever thinking of having a good time outside with other women. You nearly became an accomplice."

Xiang Shaolong simply reasoned: "The less he gets, the more he wants. You can try forcing him to visit brothels for ten straight nights. I guarantee he would be so sick of them he would avoid them like plague in the future. Besides, he visits brothels for inspiration for his music composition and is not really sleeping around."

Her almond shaped eyes staring at him, Shan Rou interrogated: "Did he plead with you to negotiate with me on his behalf?"

In actual fact, like Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong is terrified of Shan Rou. He raised his arms, surrendering: "Big Sister Rou should know whose side I am on!"

Thawing, Shan Rou sweetly smiled: "Of course I know la! It is wonderful that you are here. How about this? While Ziyuan is having a good time outside, you shall accompany me."

Xiang Shaolong stammered: "What?"

Shan Rou justified: "It is only fair!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "To be honest, I am spending every day thinking of how to preserve my life. I..."

Shan Rou scolded: "Forget it! You think you are so desirable? Who needs your company? Both of you better scram as far as you can; otherwise, do not blame me for being merciless."

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded at her words.

Shan Rou instead shot him a look and cackled with a 'pu ci': "I'm just scaring you. How would I bear to chase you away? Master Xiang is little girl's first lover. If I cannot even grant such a small request, how can you face up to Ziyuan's expectations? How about this? I shall permit the two of you to have all the fun you want tonight but you must return by 11 o'clock, otherwise, Ziyuan will have to sleep at your place." Rubbing her tummy, she wailed: "We shall not wait for Ziyuan any longer! I'm hungry."

When dinner is over and there is still no sight of Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to bid farewell and made his way back to Tingsong Villa. Just as he stepped into the Villa, the sentry reported: "Chancellor Li from Chu sent someone to look for Master Shen but Master Shen is not around so he left. Hey. Master Shen is truly well connected. Our band of brothers will follow you in the future!"

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong was thinking: I can barely fend for myself, how am I supposed to take care of so many of

you? As he gave a token response, this young family warrior named Chi Zichun lowered his voice and disclosed: "Your servant has something to report to Master Shen. It is something for Master Shen to be aware of and it mustn't be known to others that it was I who leaked this information to you."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: "What is it?"

Chi Zichun began: "Earlier today, I saw Gu Ming and Fang Sheng behaving in a suspicious manner and the two men slipped out into the streets. I decided to stalk them and witnessed them conversing with Sa Li. I believe they are up to no good and I am worried that they are plotting something against you, Master Shen."

Xiang Shaolong thought: I have my limitations and cannot cope with so many issues cropping up at the same time.

The best solution is to make another pair of ice skis and while the snow outside the city is waist deep, it is the perfect timing to 'skate' away. Even if all the soldiers of the six states were to jointly pursue him, it would still be fruitless.

This plan is indeed appealing but the problem lies with him being unable to convince himself. Moreover, Xie Ziyuan's problem is unresolved and he can never leave with a peace of mind.

Patting Chi Zichun's shoulder and dispatching some words of encouragement, he ambled towards the inner courtyard.

Chi Zichun instead caught up to him and pulled him to a corner before adding: "These is something more I need to tell Master Shen. Upon Gu Ming's return, he went to look for Second Mistress. Following that, Second Mistress and Miss Xiuzhen left the Villa too."

Xiang Shaolong was burning with rage. Up till today, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen don't know what's good for them and have remained in cahoots with Sa Li. To think he is still risking his life by staying behind for their sake.

Back at the inner residence, Xiao Yuetan is waiting for him in a small side hall in the same courtyard where his bedroom is located. He gleefully exclaimed: "Big Brother has fulfilled your request. Look!"

As he spoke, he produced a roll of parchment from his bosom and opened it up for Xiang Shaolong's perusal. It was indeed a blueprint of Qixia College that Xiang Shaolong desired.

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "That's fast." Xiao Yuetan enlightened: "It took me four long hours to finish drawing it."

Pointing to the city gate drawn on the right side of the map, he gushed: "This gate is named Beishou Gate and is situated at the west of Big City. It is also known as Qi gate and the college is beyond it. Qixia College is built near the river, increasing transportation conveniences. With the river flowing partially around it, the college becomes even more

mesmerizing to look at and is among the top eight touring sites of Lin Zi. It is a must-see attraction.”

Scrutinizing the parchment map, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Qixia College is like a small city outside the city. It even has its own city wall and roads. If I were to abruptly barge in looking for my sabre, it would be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

Drawing attention to a cluster of magnificent buildings, Xiao Yuetan indicated: “This is Qixia Hall, serving as the assembly grounds for the college as well as the place where all ceremonies and prayers would be held. Your Hundred Battle Sabre is hanging on the south wall of the big hall.”

Xiang Shaolong was fiercely determined: “Tonight is the night I will get my sabre back.”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: “This is not the best time, right? Why don’t Shaolong steal the sabre when you are about to leave Qi?” Xiang Shaolong swore: “After I steal the sabre tonight, I will leave Lin Zi first time tomorrow morning, saving Han Chuang and his conspirators plenty of headache and consideration.”

Xiao Yuetan was mystified: “The heavy snow has paralyzed all forms of transportation beyond Lin Zi City, how are you going to leave?”

Xiang Shaolong confidently assured: “I have my ways of travelling across heavy snow, otherwise, I would not have landed up here. Big Brother can put your mind at ease.”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: "It would be best if you can leave here immediately but didn't you commit to assisting Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: "That is purely my one-sided and naïve thinking. In fact, I am merely one of their pawns. Presently, I am feeling disheartened and will only make plans for myself."

His words are filled with strong emotions. Right now, his only worry is Shan Rou. However, the internal strife of Qi is beyond his jurisdiction and he cannot help much even if he stays.

The minute he decides to leave the next morning, he can feel his entire body relaxing tremendously. Whatever that is about to happen is totally none of his business.

Since Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the others are treating him like an idiot, why should he occupy himself with their affairs?

Xiao Yuetan supported: "I will prepare clothing and provisions for you at once. Tomorrow morning, I shall smuggle you out of the City."

Suddenly recalling something, he frowned: "How are you going to steal your sabre tonight? Unless you have a special travel pass, nobody is going to open the city gates for you in the middle of the night."

Slapping his forehead, Xiang Shaolong cursed: "I forgot the city gates would be closed." He began to feel anxious as he

can foresee snow accumulating on the walls of the city, causing them to be impossible to climb. But he continued brainstorming at the speed of light, rationalizing that if even Mount Everest can be scaled, what is a measly city wall? Inspired, he wondered: "Is there any way Elder Brother can get his hands on a dozen iron chisels?"

Seemingly understanding his intentions, Xiao Yuetan was pleased: "Tomorrow, I will buy them for you from the blacksmith along the neighbouring street! Do you need a hammer too?"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Since I am going to steal, I might as well steal the hammer and chisels tonight. It would shield Elder Brother from any future implications too."

Xiao Yuetan agreed: "Since you are planning on leaving, it is always better to leave earlier than later." Reaching out and holding Xiang Shaolong's hand, he hinted: "After Lu Buwei's downfall, I may accompany you to the borderlands. I am really sick of the Central Plains."

When Xiao Yuetan left, Xiang Shaolong retrieved Bloodwave and inspected the climbing equipment on his body. Upon completion, he is still feeling agitated so he concealed a dagger on each calf and had a short rest before putting on his clothes and heading to the rear entrance of the Villa.

With heavy snow continuously landing from above, everybody within the Villa is keeping to his or her respective bedrooms.

When the rear entrance came into sight, Xiang Shaolong's senses suddenly picked up something and he hastily scrambled behind a large tree.

The rear entrance door sprung open and three silhouettes slipped in.

Borrowing whatever blurred illumination the faraway lanterns could offer, Xiang Shaolong recognised two of them to be Feng Fei and Little Ping'er. The third person is a tall and imposing man whose face remains hidden.

After a reluctant Feng Fei converse briefly with the man, he reminded in a deep voice: "You must not let your heart soften. This Shen Liang is only after your money and body."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken for he could pinpoint the voice to be that of Han Jie's.

There is a difference between knowing something and affirming something. All of a sudden, he is beginning to resent Feng Fei. Based on her intelligence, she could not tell that beyond Han Jie's handsome outlook, he is basically a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Feng Fei had wanted to say something but held herself back and sighed with a breath.

When Han Jie left, both owner and servant returned back to their building.

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong ran out in pursuit. In the dark alley, the carriage Han Jie was using to send Feng Fei home was about to drive off.

As the alley is narrow and slippery, the carriage is moving at a slow pace.

Xiang Shaolong darted over and scaled the back of the carriage, noiselessly landing on the roof and prostrating down.

He did not think about the purpose of this tactic and is just trying his luck. If the carriage is not heading towards his ideal direction, he can leave anytime he wants.

With this kind of weather, it is a perfect setting for crime.

CHAPTER 7

The Sword Saint of Qixia

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE CARRIAGE made a turn onto the highway and began picking speed.

Glancing around and trying to make sense of his surroundings, Xiang Shaolong concluded that the carriage is not moving in the direction of the Chancellor Residence where Lu Buwei is supposedly residing. 'Where is Han Jie heading to?' He wondered.

He initially wanted to make use of Han Jie's carriage to discreetly leave the Villa, avoiding the detection of spies who

are keeping Tingsong Villa under surveillance. However, his curiosity is significantly aroused and he might as well enjoy his free ride and investigate further.

A long night looms ahead and there is more than sufficient time for him to execute his original grand scheme.

Pulling up his hood from his windbreaker, he was feeling at ease.

Ever since Xiao Yuetan's morning warning, the fear of betrayal by his buddies has formed an indistinguishable source of stress, making him bitter and despondent. The moment he vowed to leave with great determination, the horror has completely disappeared without a trace. His only concern is Shan Rou. If Xie Ziyuan turned out to be the loser in this conflict, based on Tian Dan's cruel methods, Shan Rou could face another calamity of clan extermination. Regarding this, he is at his wit's end and can only look on helplessly.

As the carriage swerve left and right occasionally, it finally entered the highway leading to Xie Residence.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Who is Han Jie rendezvousing?

The carriage came to a stop at the main gate of Zongsun Long's residence. The next second, a side door swung open as a tall and remarkable fellow dashed out and swiftly boarded the carriage.

Once again, the carriage began to move forward slowly.

Xiang Shaolong is incredibly puzzled. Han Jie came to Lin Zi along with Lu Buwei and should therefore align himself with Tian Dan, who is at loggerheads with Zongsun Long. Why did Han Jie meet up with someone from Zongsun Long's residence and is behaving furtively as if they are afraid of being spotted by someone.

Contemplating to this point, he would not hesitate any longer. Shifting to the edge of the carriage, he leaned over and placed his ear against the wall of the carriage and focused all his attention into eavesdropping.

A voice as deep as a bass instrument sounded from within the carriage: "Xuanhua pays his respects to Elder Martial Brother. I miss you a lot."

The man turned out to be the holder of the title: Lin Zi's number one swordsman. It is Zongsun Long's capable son, Zongsun Xuanhua.

Han Jie's voice rang out: "You are much more awe-inspiring compared to before. I am sure you have made significant improvements in your sword skills."

After Zongsun Xuanhua gave a modest reply, he praised: "Elder Martial Brother is giving me too much credit. What is the situation in Xianyang now? I heard Elder Martial Brother is doing very well!"

Han Jie guffawed: "Lao Ai is in urgent need of talented men and is naturally hospitable towards me. However, this man is extremely narrow-minded and cannot accommodate others better than himself. He can never amount to anything great.

On the other hand, Lu Buwei is indeed a hero who can see the big picture. If not for Xiang Shaolong, he would have gained absolute control of Qin.”

Zongsun Xuanhua coldly grunted: “Is Xiang Shaolong’s swordsmanship as formidable as what the rumours say?”

Han Jie sighed: “He is as unfathomable as a ghost. No one has ever comprehended what he is genuinely up to. You should have seen his Hundred Battle Sabre right! Who could imagine and create such a unique weapon that can both hack and slash?”

Zongsun Xuanhua agreed: “After esteemed teacher received the sabre from the Great King, he toyed with it for some time. Although he did not say anything, I can tell that he is moved. I rarely witness this expression on his face over the past ten years.”

Han Jie warned: “Back to business. You should take precautions in case Tian Jian and Tian Dan form a partnership.”

On the carriage roof, Xiang Shaolong was immensely stunned; finally understanding why Xie Ziyuan is behaving like it is the end of the world. Expectedly, Zongsun Xuanhua sighed with a breath: “We already knew about this and never anticipated Tian Dan to use this trick. Does Elder Martial Brother have a good counterstrategy?”

Han Jie articulated: “Lu Buwei is the mastermind behind this scheme, using his connections to pull Tian Dan and Tian Jian to the same side of the fence. Aye! Ultimately, Tian Dan is

the most powerful official of Qi. If he is willing to sacrifice Tian Sheng, it is with absolute certainty that Tian Jian would be the next King of Qi. This is unlike the past where the winner remains unpredictable. Thus, the circumstances are highly unfavourable for you and your allies.”

Zongsun Xuanhua was infuriated: “Both Father and myself have done so much for Tian Jian, how can he simply switch sides to rely on our nemesis?”

Han Jie sighed: “Power tussles within the Court are simply the way it is. From Tian Jian’s point of view, whoever that can assist him in becoming King is a useful official. Moreover... Aye! I do not know how to continue. Lu Buwei gave Tian Jian his assurance that as long as Tian Dan stays in power, Qin would never invade Qi and would even harass the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), permitting him to invade Yan without any reservations. You can see for yourself how tempting the conditions are.”

Zongsun Xuanhua icily snorted: “Only a fool would be taken in by these lies. At the end of the day, this is just Qin’s strategy of: Befriending Afar; Conquering Near.”

The eavesdropping Xiang Shaolong is even more confused than before. Whose side is Han Jie on?

Han Jie suddenly suppressed his voice and speaks even softer than before. Xiang Shaolong could not catch a single word and was about to curse him when Zongsun Xuanhua dismissed: “This is preposterous. My father and Tian Dan cannot see eye to eye and would never reconcile. In

addition, given Tian Dan's unscrupulous reputation, it would be a matter of time before we become cannon fodder."

Han Jie reasoned: "This is merely using their strategy to your advantage. Tian Jian has unwavering trust in Xie Ziyuan. If you can offer the same terms to Tian Jian, I guarantee Tian Jian would still lean towards your side."

Up till this point, Xiang Shaolong has lost all interest in the conversation. He carefully and gingerly somersaulted off the carriage and vanished into the gloomy lanes.

Locating a shadowy and secluded corner along the west city wall, Xiang Shaolong tore off a part of his shirt and wrapped it around the head of the hammer. He incessantly hammered one chisel after another, one higher than the other, into the city wall, which had accumulated a large amount of snow. He then began to step on the iron chisels and ascended the city wall just like mountain climbers.

To avoid the wind and snow, the patrolling soldiers have fortified themselves within a battlement. Using the grappling hook and ropes, Xiang Shaolong easily flipped himself out of the city and treaded on the snow towards Qixia College.

Despite the flying snowflakes and dim illumination of lanterns, he caught sight of the tall surrounding wall around the courtyard where Qixia College is situated. The college sits atop a small hill beyond the west gate and is formed by countless conjoined buildings, emitting an impressive sensation.

Currently, Xiang Shaolong is no longer concerned about Xie Ziyuan's fate in the power tussle for the throne of Qi. Since Xie Ziyuan is Tian Jian's most trusted subordinate, even if Tian Jian switched sides and relied on Tian Dan, Xie Ziyuan would retain his usefulness. The sacrificial lambs would be limited to Zongsun Long and First Prince Tian Sheng.

Once he obtained his Hundred Battle Sabre, he could instantly run as far away as he likes, filling him with infinite joy. With the aid of snow skis, he would be back in the warm comfort of his own home in Xianyang within thirty days. In this world, is there anything more delightful than this?

Utilizing the cover of snowy forest on the left of Qixia College, he slithered towards the east wall, fully displaying this forte of the Special Forces. As the wall is only a third as high as Lin Zi's city wall, he simply somersaulted over the college's outer wall.

Identifying the main cluster of buildings, Xiang Shaolong raised his alertness to a maximum as he snuck towards his goal.

From the lantern's glow, the corridors linking the various courtyards were void of pedestrians and noise. From afar, the sound of a flute and a zither is audible. It was a scene of tranquility.

The time is nearly eleven o'clock and most of the population should be fast asleep in bed, granting Xiang Shaolong much convenience.

Arriving at the garden of the main hall, he finally observed three men who are dressed in scholarly uniforms walking by. Promptly concealing himself behind a clump of trees, he did not anticipate the three men to suddenly halt and began admiring the snow. Stuck, Xiang Shaolong could neither advance nor retreat and was forced to listen to their exchange.

Out of the blue, one of the men started to ponder about 'Heaven'. He professed: "A ruler must first familiarize himself with Heaven. Not knowing the workings of Heaven and the laws of Nature, the ruler will be like scratching an itchy feet without taking off the shoe. Tutor Shen, what is your opinion on this?"

The man named Tutor Shen wondered: "Is Lecturer Lao feeling the effects of the relentless snowstorm and becoming pessimistic, thereby allowing these thoughts to arise?"

The third man laughed: "Nobody understands Lecturer Lao better than Tutor Shen but I would connect his present thinking to his recent research of Xun Kuang's System of Heaven."

The camouflaged Xiang Shaolong is first hand experiencing for himself the culture of hollow discussion by Qixia scholars. He prayed they would leave as soon as possible.

Lecturer Lao solemnly explained: "This time round, Lecturer Chou is mistaken. I am in full disagreement with Xun Kuang's System of Heaven. Xun Kuang's Non Intervention is only

good in theory but is non-executable. It is a wide departure from reality despite the wide topics that have been debated. Compared to Guan Zhong's Man King Heaven Earth, they are poles apart. The latter book relates a necessary and practical approach to recognizing the correlation between Heaven and Man."

Tutor Shen bellowed with laughter: "Lecturer Lao has stirred my interests! Come! Let us return to our rooms before cooking some wine and chatting into the night."

After the three men have wandered off, Xiang Shaolong thanked Heaven & Earth. Scooting out, he furtively made a wide detour around a frozen pond outside the main hall. Coming to a west facing window of the main hall, he pried open a window shutter and opened it slightly. Upon peeping in, he observed a tall, spacious and wide inner structure that could easily accommodate a hundred men. Towards the south wall, a portion of it stands an elevated platform that is usually reserved for prayers. Right above the stage is a giant signboard, which the four words 'Qixia Hall' were sculptured.

What left Xiang Shaolong the deepest impression were the carved flowers on the beams situated at the top of the hall. Coupled with huge, red painted pillars, they give the hall an authoritative and formal ambience while appearing intimidating at the same time.

In this moment, the other doors and windows are securely fastened. The only source of light is two oil lamps positioned on the platform, bathing the main hall in dim red

illumination and from bright to dark depending on the distance between lamps and the section of the hall.

Scanning the hall a few times, he finally pinpointed his Hundred Battle Sabre hanging high up in the middle of the East wall. If he tried jumping, he should be able to touch the end of the sabre.

Exhilarated, Xiang Shaolong crossed the window ledge and somersaulted into the hall, briskly walking towards the Hundred Battle Sabre.

The interior of the great hall is still void of noise and human but in his heart, Xiang Shaolong was instead experiencing an indescribable feeling, causing him extreme discomfort.

His hand wrapping around the hilt of Bloodwave, Xiang Shaolong stopped walking.

With an 'Eeek' sound, the door leading to the front portion began to swing open despite the lack of wind or action.

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. He was about to make a run for it but it is already too late.

What followed was a cold snigger as a man dressed in white arrogantly entered the hall. Every time his step lands on the ground, it would create a sound; seemingly playing a melody that resembles a death knoll. The bizarre thing is although he was not walking very quickly, Xiang Shaolong could sense that this man could intercept himself if he had tried to retreat through the window.

What was truly disheartening and frightening was: Although this man has yet to draw his sword, he is already emitting an overpowering and domineering aura, making Xiang Shaolong feel that he would lose without a doubt.

An encounter with such a fearsome swordsman is a first for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong bravely turned around to meet his opponent face to face.

The man leisurely stopped about ten odd feet away from Xiang Shaolong. With charcoal black hair that laid spread over his wide and muscular shoulders, he possess a nose hooked like an eagle's beak and a pair of deep set, penetrating eyes, giving the impression that he is a man without mercy. Hanging by the side of his body, his two hands are longer than the average man and the skin of his face and hands are as white as snow. In terms of appearance and body built, it is something even Xiang Shaolong considers rare. He is even taller and ferocious looking than Guan Zhongxie, giving others a ruthless vibe.

His eyes are profound and unfathomable, glowing with focus and a sense of fearlessness, and felt like they never need to blink.

The sharp contrast of black hair and white skin portrays him to be like a Warrior Chief from Hell who has broken through the earth to enter the human realm.

Xiang Shaolong gasped with a surprise breath: "Cao Cuidao?"

The man assessed him swiftly and nodded: "That is right. I did not expect the sabre thief tonight when I just received news this very afternoon. Report your name. I wish to see who is it that has the guts to create trouble at my, Cao Cuidao's, place."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank all the way to the bottom.

Only two men, Han Chuang and Xiao Yuetan, know about his intention to commit theft. The latter obviously would not betray him. Only Han Chuang remains. Despite saving his life on multiple occasions, Han Chuang has resorted to using this despicable scheme of 'Borrowing someone else's knife' to kill himself, causing Xiang Shaolong to feel depressed and hurt.

From the standpoint of the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), it would be excellent if Xiang Shaolong was killed by a Qi native. When Qin and Qi wage war on each other, the Three States will stand to benefit without paying any price.

Casting aside all desires to retrieve his sabre as well as all irrelevant thoughts, he fixated his attention on surviving this encounter. Once he composed his emotions, he drew Bloodwave out with a 'Jiang!' and hollered in a low voice: "Awaiting instructions from the Saint!"

He is aware he cannot get off the hook easily and a quick battle is the best way out. In the meantime, he will look for a window of opportunity to make a getaway. If more people are alerted and rushed over in assistance, he would not be able to escape even if he grew wings.

Cao Cuidao plainly state: "You have got guts. For the past ten years, nobody has dared to draw his sword in front of me. You have come with pure defiance as I have given strict orders, forbidding anyone to enter the great hall at night. I will personally deal with all offenders and you happened to be the first."

Witnessing that with his sword still sheathed, this man is already eyeing the world with contempt and behaved as if he is unstoppable, he dared not be complacent and shifted slightly forward and pointed his sword at him, generating his own fighting aura that can barely withstand the invisible pressure coming from his opponent. Only the best fighters are able to produce such an astounding effect.

His eyebrow twitched as Cao Cuidao revealed a small sign of surprise on his face. He demanded: "Show me what you have!"

How glad was Xiang Shaolong when he heard these words. Fighting against this widely acknowledged number one swordsman whose sword skills have attained a saintly level, he was actually filled with horror. Looking at his posture as if he need not use his sword, Xiang Shaolong cannot afford to hold back and unleashed Mozi's most powerful attack from the Three Killing Stances: Attacking while Defending. Coupled with his striding footwork, Bloodwave whizzed towards Cao Cuidao.

Xiang Shaolong could not think of another swordplay that was more suited for this kind of situation. Even if Cao Cuidao

has three heads and six arms, this would be his first encounter with such an amazing sword style. No matter what, he would have to adopt a defensive position for a few moves before counterattacking. When that happens, he could use this advantage to run for his life.

With a 'Yi!' sound, the front of Cao Cuidao abruptly exploded into a mass of sword flashes.

Xiang Shaolong has never seen such a fast sword in his whole life. The moment he saw his opponent's hand move, the sword flashes instantly advanced towards himself. Not only is there no sign of a defensive position, it is a hardcore style of facing an attack head on with his own attack.

His mind processing at the speed of electricity, he concludes that beside a fast sword, his opponent's sword strength and sword skills are beyond comparison, achieving an amazing and fascinating level. Based on past formidable opponents such as Guan Zhongxie, Cao Cuidao's fighting ability is at least two levels higher up. Simply put, Xiang Shaolong is definitely not his match.

As the thoughts sink in, his fighting spirit decreased by half and he no longer possess the courage to attack forcefully, deciding to concentrate on defending instead. He swung his sword out.

DANG!

Using all his innate abilities, Xiang Shaolong shifted horizontally by three feet. Coupled with his footwork, he barely parried the incoming sword Cao Cuidao has sent

flying towards his chest. He could instantly feel the strength of his opponent crushing down on him like a mountain and could not help but take half a step back.

Retrieving his sword and standing still, his eyes shone with delight as Cao Cuidao cheerfully laughed: "You actually managed to block an attack that I have launched with full strength. This is wonderful. It is hard to find a worthy opponent nowadays. If you can withstand another nine strokes from me, I will let you leave."

Xiang Shaolong's right hand is turning numb as he realized his opponent is born with the strength of an ox, easily surpassing his own. No wonder he has yet to meet with defeat.

Just by forcefully slashing with a sword, he could easily overwhelm most swordsmen. Moreover, he has trained to become an outstanding and invincible swordsman, inducing fear wherever he goes.

In front of this master swordsman, even though they are about the same height, Xiang Shaolong would somehow view himself as being the shorter one.

Don't even talk about nine strokes of his sword. He would be glad if he could successfully block the next strike.

Xiang Shaolong knows that without confidence and hope, he would certainly and regrettably meet his demise in this hall tonight. However, his opponent's stifling effect has never left the scene, giving him the sensation of futility as if his every effort would surely be thwarted. At his level of

accomplishment, he is already undergoing such pressure. If it were a less skillful swordsman in his shoes, his heart and gall would have imploded, ending his life without the sword necessarily piercing his body.

Cao Cuidao is able to surpass all other swordsmen because his cultivation of the sword has reached a godly state.

Cao Cuidao coldly rumbled: "The second stroke!"

With a 'SWA!' sound, the opponent's long sword came slashing down.

Xiang Shaolong has gathered all his energy in preparation for this blow but this attack of Cao Cuidao has somewhat given him the allusion that it is unblockable.

This strike is neither a fast strike nor a slow strike. Cao Cuidao is in full control of the speed of the attack but Xiang Shaolong could inherently sense that Cao Cuidao is putting all his strength into this blow.

Logically, the more strength one puts into the attack, the faster the weapon would move and vice versa. However, Cao Cuidao's strike is neither fast nor slow but is able to create the perception that it carries his full strength behind it.

Xiang Shaolong is exceedingly depressed. What strongly bugged him was this strange and unexplainable sword move and the conflicting speed. His conviction is beginning to waver and he could not fix the point where he wishes to parry the attack, causing tremendous anxiety. In all his duels

and battles, this is the first time he felt so powerless despite his abilities.

His fear may consume him but the inbound sword needs to be parried nonetheless. Fortunately, his mental energy has always been steady. Notwithstanding this disadvantageous scenario, he is able to swiftly recollect his emotions and resumed his calm demeanor.

His intuition tells him if he were to step back, the opponent's sword would attack with the force of a bursting dam and death will be a likelihood.

Running out of choices, Xiang Shaolong adopted a horse stance and twirled his sword, trailing a crescent of sword brilliance before piercing towards Cao Cuidao's abdomen.

Theoretically, his attack is faster than Cao Cuidao's by a tiny bit. Therefore, unless Cao Cuidao increases his attacking speed, he would have to block Xiang Shaolong's blow instead. Otherwise, by the time Xiang Shaolong's sword impaled his abdomen, Cao Cuidao's sword would still be about six inches away from Xiang Shaolong's face.

As cool as ever, Cao Cuidao snorted once and twisted his wrist downwards, flawlessly and accurately chopping down on the sword tip of the advancing Bloodwave. It is as if Xiang Shaolong had purposely prepared the sword for him to chop down on.

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed. With a 'DING!' sound, the top section of Bloodwave, around an inch long, has been

sliced off. With the vibrating hilt causing much pain to his hand, he has no choice but to take a step back.

Cao Cuidao let out a string of laughter. His sword stance becoming strong again, he roared: "The third stroke!" In a flash, his sword is about to reach Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong finally and thoroughly experienced the worldly sword skills of this world famous Grandmaster Swordsman. His swords skills are simply extraordinary and behind a seemingly ordinary move are countless hidden variations and tricks, which one can never expect or guard against.

For example, this is an ordinary attack but it would somehow give the impression that he has devoted every muscle in his body, all his feelings and spiritual energy concentrated into one single blow. As a result, even a plain move like this is filled with a devastating power that one cannot hope to resist against.

In the past, no matter what types of marvelous sword moves Xiang Shaolong encounters, he could easily launch a counterattack. On the contrary, confronted with Cao Cuidao's simple looking but complicated sword style, he felt as if his hands and legs are tied and could not put up a successful defence.

To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong was in the middle of taking the step back while Cao Cuidao's sword is fast approaching him like a lightning strike, causing him to be in a dilemma

whether to step back or forward. From this episode, it demonstrates Cao Cuidao's excellent grasp of timing.

Since the beginning of the duel, Xiang Shaolong has been encountering restrictions in all his sword moves. If this goes on, it would be a miracle if he did not end up dead.

Xiang Shaolong viciously gnashed his teeth and turned his body while attacking with his sword. He simultaneously kicked out from below at the speed of light, aiming at Cao Cuidao's right calf, which happened to be taking a forward stride.

Cao Cuidao bellowed in a low voice: "How dare you!"

Hacking his sword against Cao Cuidao's sword, Xiang Shaolong was surprised when he did not hear the sound of weapons clashing. It turned out that when both swords came into contact, Cao Cuidao displayed an uncanny move by twisting his sword around Xiang Shaolong's, forcing him to stumble forward with the same momentum and naturally negating his kick from below.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong knows he is in deep trouble. As the whistling of the sword rang out in the air, an ominous atmosphere descended on him from all directions, making him feel like he is caught in the middle of a tsunami.

In this life and death situation, Xiang Shaolong casted off every single notion about escaping away that has been occupying his mind. With regards to Cao Cuidao's aggressive sword stances, he treated them with emptiness and

gathered all his vigor to launch a blow towards Cao Cuidao's head.

Under the present circumstances, he could only rely on the fastest speed and selecting the shortest route, forcing his opponent to parry this attack no matter what. Otherwise, even the powerful Cao Cuidao would end up in a scenario where both men would be severely injured.

Nevertheless, he has underestimated Cao Quidao once again.

Out of a sudden, he can feel a cold sensation emanating from an area near his left ribcage. Cao Cuidao's sword had stabbed his body before flipping upward, breaking his killing move.

Although the opponent's sword only penetrated about an inch into his flesh, Xiang Shaolong can feel fresh blood gushing out of the wound. If this loss of blood were to go on, it would not be long before he would lose the ability to fight. Cao Cuidao's sword is so quick that up till this point in time, he has yet to feel the pain from the injury.

Cao Cuidao laughed boisterously: "The fourth stroke!"

Rapidly formulating a plan, Xiang Shaolong pretended to collapse, discarding Bloodwave onto the ground and at the same time, staggered a few steps backwards.

Just as Cao Cuidao was still reeling with astonishment, Xiang Shaolong retreated to the spot below the Hundred Battle

Sabre. He hurriedly leapt up, grabbing the end of the sabre sheathe, finally obtaining his beloved treasure weapon.

Cao Cuidao furiously thundered: "You are asking for death!" Conjuring a multitude of sword flashes with the sword in his hand, he darted forward with steady footwork, propelling another attack at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong drew out the sabre from its sheathe, something that he hasn't done for quite some time. With his left hand clutching the sheathe and his right hand gripping the sabre, his confidence increased by several folds.

DANG!

Unanticipated by Cao Quidao, Xiang Shaolong vehemently parried his sword with the sheathe and with a wave of his wrist, SUA! SUA! SUA! He made three continuous chops at his opponent, resembling three lightning strikes. The chops were indomitable and overbearing to the max.

Cao Cuidao's is vulnerable as this is the first time he is fighting against a sabre which forte lies in chopping moves. To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong is using the sheathe to block his sword and simultaneously counterattacking with the sabre.

Nevertheless, he did not exhibit the slightest display of fluster and for the first time, adopted a defensive position. Without taking a single step backwards, he resisted torrent after torrent of sabre chops.

The sound of clashing of the sword and the sabre rang out non-stop.

Xiang Shaolong senses that his opponent is like a fortress which cannot be conquered. Regardless of the angle he struck with his sabre, Cao Cuidao is always able to negate his attack. This consciousness is beginning to weigh down on his mind, resulting in a form of stress. Nonetheless, being able to force him into a defensive position within a short space of time is something he can be proud of.

Letting out a long laugh, Xiang Shaolong delivered another earth smattering strike before retreating and calling out: "How many strokes is it now?"

Cao Cuidao halted in bewilderment, realizing that they have long exceeded the agreed ten strokes.

Picking up Bloodwave along the way, Xiang Shaolong made good his escape through the window.

CHAPTER 8

Edge of Death

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER ten odd steps, both his legs softened and Xiang Shaolong collapsed in the snowy garden. The area around his sword wound was splattered with blood, soaking through his clothes. He is beginning to feel a heart wrenching pain.

His head spinning, he forced himself to get up. It could be due to his earlier overexertion or the substantial loss of blood. Either way, it is impossible for him to leave this place.

But if he chose to stay in this freezing weather, it would be a miracle if he did not end up as a stiff, frozen corpse tomorrow morning.

He could detect some voices from afar. It appears that the noise generated from their fight has cause some alarm among the College residents. However, nobody dared to investigate due to Cao Cuidao's strict orders!

Digging out his dagger, Xiang Shaolong tore off a section of his clothes and brought out the external wound medicine Xiao Yuetan had prepared for him to bring on his journey. After applying the medicine, he bandaged the wound and recomposed his emotions before getting back on his feet.

The voices he heard earlier have dissipated and are replaced by complete silence.

Discarding Bloodwave among a clump of tall grass, he tied Hundred Battle Sabre securely on his back. Enduring the heart throbbing pain, he limped towards the outlying area one step at a time.

Passing by several houses, Xiang Shaolong could not take it any longer and had to stop for a break. He thought to himself: It would be great to have a horse carriage right now. Regardless of where it is heading, he would not mind at all. In his current condition, skiing back to Xianyang is but a crazy dream.

Inspired, he quickly and furtively proceeded towards the square in the front courtyard.

It is the usual practice to leave the carriage body in the square after the horses have been led away. If he can sneak into an empty carriage box and last till tomorrow morning, he may be able to find a way to leave this place.

In a short while, he had made his way to the driveway leading to the square. All around him, most of the houses have extinguished their lanterns and are filled with darkness. Only two or three windows are still illuminated, likely belonging to students who are defying the cold to continue their studies.

Because of overexertion and loss of blood, Xiang Shaolong's body temperature is decreasing rapidly and he is shivering nonstop. Right now, even taking a single step is an arduous task for him.

Right at this second, the sound of carriage wheels rotating can be heard from behind.

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amazed. It is deep into the night. Who is riding a carriage and leaving the College at this hour? He hurriedly shied to a side.

The carriage came closer and closer. It turned out to be Han Jie's carriage and Xiang Shaolong could recognise the clothes of the driver.

Xiang Shaolong thanked the Heaven and Earth. As the carriage drove past him, he used his last ounce of energy to climb onto the carriage roof, allowing the carriage to deliver him back into the ancient city of Lin Zi.

After additional difficulties and hardships, he finally found his way back to Tingsong Villa. The moment he tumbled into bed, he was knocked out immediately. He pretty much laid there without moving an inch until midday when Xiao Yuetan roused him awake, wondering: "Why is your face so dreadful looking?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "After being pierced by Cao Cuidao's sword, who can maintain a healthy appearance?"

Xiao Yuetan was aghast: "What!"

Xiang Shaolong updated him about everything that happened last night before adding: "We are able to prove two things from this episode. Firstly, Feng Fei's lover is none other than Han Jie and secondly, Han Chuang has betrayed me."

Xiao Yuetan was upset: "Based on your current condition, you are not ready to travel."

Xiang Shaolong swore: "I will make a full recovery in three days time. By then, I can go as far as I wish and ignore everything at hand."

Xiao Yuetan advised: "I will spread the word that you have fallen ill. For the next three days, you should try to stay within the boundaries of Tingsong Villa. No matter what, it is safer here."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Let's hope so!"

After Xiao Yuetan's departure, Xiang Shaolong pretended to be asleep to avoid entertaining well-wishers.

Xiao Yuetan came over to change his dressing and medication when it was late in the afternoon. He whispered: "It is truly puzzling. There were simply no signs of excitement or news from Qixia College. It is as if nothing has happened last night. They should at least inform the public about the theft of Hundred Battle Sabre."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "From your understanding, would Cao Cuidao correctly deduce the thief he encountered last night was me, Xiang Shaolong?"

Slapping his thigh, Xiao Yuetan nodded: "Of course he would. Only someone familiar with the qualities of Hundred Battle Sabre is able to showcase the full abilities of the weapon. And only Xiang Shaolong has the potential to match Cao Cuidao in terms of swordsmanship."

He then frowned: "But if Cao Cuidao exposes your presence to the Qi Court, future problems would only increase in complexity."

Xiang Shaolong disparaged: "No matter what, I am going to leave soon. So it is no big deal. Most crucially, nobody dares to deal with me in an open and aboveboard manner. Even Han Chuang has to make use of someone else's hand to take my life." Recalling this matter, he could not help but sigh with a breath. Being betrayed by a good friend really hurts.

Comprehending his pain, Xiao Yuetan patted him, quizzing: "Did Li Yuan send anyone to ask about you?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "Logically, since Li Yuan knows that I am looking for him, he should come over and visit me."

After a short contemplation, Xiao Yuetan suggested: "Maybe he is feeling guilt-ridden and is too embarrassed to face you. Aye! Is Cao Cuidao really that good?"

Still retaining some horror from last night, Xiang Shaolong described: "His swordsmanship has exceeded all physical limits, surpassing the capabilities of human and entered a godly state. Against him, I am totally powerless and is basically a punching bag for him."

Xiao Yuetan informed: "Do you know that when he duels with other challengers, most of them could not even stand properly. Without him making a move, they would have discarded their sword and admit defeat."

Xiang Shaolong had a similar experience and he confessed: "I know how that feels like."

Xiao Yuetan analyzed: "If you were equipped with Hundred Battle Sabre at the start of the fight, what would be the outcome?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "The outcome would be my demise."

Xiao Yuetan was surprised: "You are really a modest person and do not place too much emphasis on victory or defeat. From my point of view, the main reason he has the upper hand is because you just discovered that a good friend had

betrayed you. Thus, your mind is too distracted to summon your full fighting spirit. Moreover, your mind is also clouded with thoughts of wanting to escape, resulting in you harnessing less than half of your full potential. In a different setting and equipped with Hundred Battle Sabre, I am certain you would be a worthy adversary to Cao Cuidao.”

Xiang Shaolong’s confidence has been shattered by Cao Cuidao the night before. He sighed: “Right now, I just want to run away as far as possible and never come back. In the past, regardless of how terrifying or perilous the situation is, death would never cross my mind. However, Cao Cuidao’s sword is like a weapon constantly reminding me about my fear of death. With such extraordinary sword skills, he is someone I both fear and admire.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed with a breath and changed the topic: “Has Feng Fei been here?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Almost everyone has been here except for her who has been keeping away from me. With regards to her, I have given up all hopes.”

Learning that he was ‘awake’, Dong Shuzen came to visit. Xiao Yuetan took the opportunity to excuse himself.

Taking small steps, the beauty sashayed to his bedside and sat down. Reaching out with her hand and stroking his face, her eyes glowed with intense emotions as she soothingly asked: “Are you feeling better? Aye! You do not appear to be a feeble man. How did you suddenly fall sick?”

Xiang Shaolong wished he could interrogate her about her continuing liaison with the despicable cad Sa Li but eventually suppressed the urge. He weakly replied: "Regarding this, you have to seek the answer from Heaven."

Dong Shuzen threw herself on his chest and began crying wretchedly.

Xiang Shaolong could feel her agony and stretched out his uninjured left hand, caressing her fragrant shoulder. In a loving and sympathetic tone, he consoled: "This is not the time to grieve. For your future, Second Mistress must learn to be strong."

Dong Shuzen pitifully mourned: "All my hopes for the future can only be decided by men. Now that you are down with a strange illness, what should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger stirring. He lamented: "I am not the only person you can rely on. Why is Second Mistress so distraught?"

Her petite frame trembled once before Dong Shuzen straightened her back. With tear filled eyes, she questioned in a surprised tone: "What do you mean by that? Currently, Xiuzhen and I have placed all our hopes on you. We do not have other arrangements."

Xiang Shaolong was filled with disdain: "If this is true, why did you secretly communicate with Sa Li yesterday?"

Dong Shuzen panicked: "That is a baseless allegation. If Xiuzhen or myself is still in cahoots with Sa Li, may we die a horrible death."

Scrutinizing her body language, Xiang Shaolong can tell that she is not putting on an act. Concurrently, he was enlightened about the fact that Chi Zichun is a follower of Sa Li. He had intentionally made these comments to frame the two ladies, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, and at the same time, he could gain the trust of Xiang Shaolong in preparation of laying another trap. He was nearly tricked.

However, another problematic issue has arisen. With the two ladies placing their faith in him and him alone, he can no longer leave without with a care in the world. Presently, he is barely able to fend for himself. How can he afford to extent his protection to them?

Tears began welling up in the pretty eyes of Dong Shuzen and two large tears the size of a bean soon rolled down her face. She bitterly sighed: "Xiuzhen and I are now trusting you without any reservations, you..."

Xiang Shaolong used a finger to press on her full, red lips, breaking off her sentence. He whispered: "Is there any way for you to notify Lord Longyang, asking him to come and see me."

Dong Shuzen nodded: "I understand. Shuzen will see to this straightaway and it will be accomplished without anyone's knowledge."

After Dong Shuzen left, the seemingly unperturbed Feng Fei finally came to visit him. For some reason, Xiang Shaolong can sense that her attitude is somewhat different from before. Her eyes appear to be hiding some sort of secret.

In her usual graceful and elegant fashion, she sat down by his side and stretched out her right hand to touch his forehead before gently speaking: "Fortunately, your fever is not very high. I heard Mister is attending to your healing. You should make a full recovery in a short while."

Relating her presence to Han Jie, Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "My sincere thanks to Mistress for your concern. How is the ongoing rehearsal? The birthday banquet for the King of Qi is in five day's time."

Feng Fei bitterly wondered: "From your tone, it sounded like we are complete strangers. Since when did our relationship degenerate to such a state?"

In this instance, Xiang Shaolong noticed the side of her hair is a little messy, as if she cannot be bothered to groom herself. Raising his hand to arrange her hair, he enquired along the line: "Didn't Little Ping'er help to comb your hair and apply your makeup today?"

Feng Fei bitterly smiled: "After learning that such a healthy man like you has become unwell, she has lost focus in her duties."

As she talked, Feng Fei naturally raised her pair of dainty hands to tidy her own hair.

Xiang Shaolong's gaze firstly landed on her chest. Due to Feng Fei raising her arms, her curvy and protruding breasts are much more highlighted than before and Xiang Shaolong could trace their outline. Shifting his gaze upward, his attention was immediately captured by an exquisite silver ring on her slender finger. His heart was instantly filled with shock.

Feng Fei stopped arranging her hair and questioned with astonishment: "Why is your face so ghastly looking?"

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing a tsunami.

That silver ring, as he remembered correctly, was a secret killing weapon with a concealed poison needle. Back at Xianyang Drunken Wind Brothel when they first met, Feng Fei frankly admitted to him that someone has instructed her to use this ring to murder him, Xiang Shaolong. Eventually, she discarded the ring on the floor, demonstrating her abortion of the assassination plan. Presently, this dangerous ring has suddenly appeared on her lovely finger. Needless to say, it must be Han Jie egging her to kill himself in order to demonstrate her loyalty towards Han Jie. No wonder her bearing is so much different compared to before.

Of course Feng Fei did not know he has seen through her scam. She whined: "Why are you not answering me?"

Suppressing his surging emotions, Xiang Shaolong is deeply troubled.

If Feng Fei tries to prick him with the poison needle in the ring, what should he do?

He naturally could not allow himself to be pricked but if he exposed her right now, it would be as good as telling her he is Xiang Shaolong. He was stuck in a dilemma.

While he was as dazed as a piece of wood, Feng Fei threw herself across his chest, grieving: "Why does Feng Fei have to meet a man like you under such circumstances?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is having an emotional outburst but his main concern is still centered around the killing weapon on her jade finger. Swiftly grabbing her 'poisonous hand' which is trying to hug him around the neck, he simultaneously distracted her: "Why would Mistress fall in love with a man who happens to be Lao Ai's partner in crime?"

Guilt ridden, Feng Fei's hourglass figure shuddered violently and as she sat upright, retracting her 'poisonous hand'. Pretending to be angry, she furiously derided: "Can you stop making wild guesses? I do not know this Han Jie at all."

Still occupying himself with the poisonous ring and anticipating an attack anytime, Xiang Shaolong tempted: "You are still trying to hide the truth from me. Does Mistress wish to know who did Han Jie visit after sending you home last night?"

He was simply saying the first thing that came to his mind but as the words left his lips, he was shaken by a new realization.

Isn't Zongsun Long desperate to obtain Feng Fei for himself? Now that Han Jie is on close terms with his son, wouldn't it appear controversial?

Feng Fei made an 'Ah!' sound and turned speechless.

Xiang Shaolong began to calm down; knowing that she would not ambush him without first finding out who did Han Jie went to see. He cheekily smiled: "If Mistress continues to deny the truth, there is no point in discussing this any further."

Lowering her face, Feng Fei questioned in a low voice: "Who did he went to see?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Zongsun Xuanhua."

Feng Fei gasped: "What?"

Reaching out and patting her face with his hand, Xiang Shaolong mumbled incoherently: "Mistress had better think carefully over it! I am dead tired and need a rest. Only in my dreams can I avoid this scheming and deceitful world that is filled with hatred and violence, and visit Paradise."

Feng Fei was taken aback: "What is Paradise?"

Xiang Shaolong began telling her the story from 'Tales of Paradise', authored by Tao Yanming. He altered the characters and the timing of the story according.

Out of the blue, Feng Fei's face was all covered with tears and she cannot even speak properly from her crying. Leaping

into his arms once again, she bemoaned: "What should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong honestly advocated: "Regarding this matter, patience and further observation is required. Although Han Jie did went to see Zongsun Xuanhua, it does not amount to anything yet. Will Mistress grant your servant some time to investigate further?"

Feng Fei shook her head: "At least he should tell me he is going to meet Zongsun Xuanhua!"

On behalf of all men, Xiang Shaolong apologized: "It is a habit of men to withhold knowledge of his activities from women."

After some thought, Feng Fei slowly revealed: "If it were someone else, given the present circumstances, he would surely speak badly of Han Jie. Aye! Shen Liang ah! What kind of person are you?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Till now, you have no idea? I am an authentic, real life dummy, which nobody can deny. Despite knowing Mistress lying and plotting against me, I could not bear to see you crying and in pain."

Feng Fei sat upright and allowed Xiang Shaolong to wipe away her tears while maintaining a wooden expression.

Xiang Shaolong did not know what to say next. Luckily, Lord Longyang happened to come by and prevented an awkward scenario.

After Lord Longyang took over Feng Fei's seat, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly remarked: "I nearly died at the hands of Han Chuang and I thought I will never see Your Lordship again."

Lord Longyang was thunderstruck: "What do you mean?"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lord Longyang has 'feelings' for him and would be truthful. Therefore, he concluded that he is in the dark about this matter and told him about everything that happened last night.

His face continuously drained of colour, Lord Longyang contemplated for a short period of time before deciding: "The snowing has finally stopped. When the weather improves over the next two days, I will immediately escort you out of Lin Zi."

Xiang Shaolong cautioned: "We must never do that; otherwise, Your Lordship would be found guilty of committing treason. Right now, I only want to find out if Han Chuang had informed Guo Kai about my affairs."

Lord Longyang affirmed: "You can count on me. Now that you have mentioned it, Han Chuang did verbally test my loyalty towards you. This traitor is always saying one thing but doing another. How contemptible!"

Xiang Shaolong reassured: "I would not pin all the blame on him. I am sure he has resorted to this because he had no other choice. Based on our friendship, it is not difficult to guard against him but if he had informed Guo Kai, then the situation would be much more dangerous."

Standing up, Lord Longyang swore: "I will launch my investigations immediately. All I need to do is to pretend to scheme against you in front of Han Chuang. I guarantee he will divulge all his plans."

After Lord Longyang's departure, Xiang Shaolong can feel his mood improving, aiding in his recovery and healing by more than half.

This time round, he made the correct bet.

Based on the friendship between Lord Longyang and himself, it would be challenging for Lord Longyang to plot against him for a second time.

In the midst of his thoughts, he unknowingly drifted into slumber. By the time he woke up again, it was already evening time.

Xie Ziyuan is here.

CHAPTER 9

Enemies Are Bound To Meet On A Narrow Road

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

SETTLING down on a cushion beside Xiang Shaolong's bed, Xie Ziyuan scratched his head, wondering: "How did you end up in such a terrible state? Little Brother was thinking of asking you out for some fun."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: "Have you resolved your problem?"

Xie Ziyuan lamented: "Even if it cannot be solved, Little Brother is still required to compose a finale song for Lan

Gongyuan. This time, I am in trouble and I am afraid the Great King would hold me responsible.”

Feeling anxious for him, Xiang Shaolong panicked: “There are only five days left. What should we do? Can’t you go on your own?”

Xie Ziyuan bitterly smiled: “Wifey only trusts you and you alone. If I do not bring you home for her approval, I would be stuck at home.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Why don’t you say you are going over to Zongsun Long’s place for an important discussion?”

Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Zongsun Xuanhua is terrified of her. She will know that I am lying by just simply questioning him.”

Pushing his blanket aside and rising from his bed, Xiang Shaolong gave in: “Then Little Brother has to put my health at risk and accompany you despite my illness.”

In actual fact, other than his face turning ashen white due to substantial loss of blood, Xiang Shaolong is not as bad as he looks. After half a night and a full day of rest, he has recovered his physical strength. All that remains is an occasional pain from his wound.

Arriving at Xie residence, Shan Rou was equally shocked at his appearance. Sending Xie Ziyuan away for an errand, she privately inquired: “What happened to you?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I was injured by your Master’s sword.”

Shan Rou was confounded: "What?"

In a brief manner, Xiang Shaolong highlighted the important points to her. Before Shan Rou could say anything in reply, Xie Ziyuan had returned and they are forced to change topics.

The minute they stepped outside Xie Residence, Xie Ziyuan seemed to transform into a rope-playing monkey. He enthusiastically gushed: "We are going over to Lan Gongyuan's Jade Orchid Brothel tonight. That girl has expressed some interest in me."

Compared to Shi Sufang and Feng Fei, Lan Gongyuan barely knows about himself so Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I shall follow Brother Xie's arrangement."

Xie Ziyuan joyfully chirped: "If I inform this Soft Boned Beauty we are there for the purpose of composing a new song, she would surely pay us a visit regardless of her busy schedule."

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "Do not forget we must be home by eleven o'clock. Otherwise, even the King of Qi cannot save you."

Xie Ziyuan solemnly promised: "Whenever Little Brother visits the brothel, it is only to soak in the ambience of the red light district, evoking inspiration for my songs. I do not bear any ulterior motives and four hours is more than sufficient for me!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I see. In this case, I can put my mind at ease."

Xie Ziyuan suddenly sighed with a breath and stared out of the carriage window at the pure white landscape formed after the snowfall.

Xiang Shaolong understandingly enquired: "Are you still bothered about work?"

Xie Ziyuan resentfully smiled: "I would be lying through my teeth if I say I am not bothered. I just met the Second Prince this morning. Aye! I should not tell you about my affairs."

Following that, his spirits rose as he exclaimed: "We are here!"

Under a bevy of escorts at the front and back, the carriage drove into the compound of Lin Zi's most famous Jade Orchid Brothel.

With great fanfare, both men were ushered into the brothel.

The sky is turning dark and the lamps are being lighted at this point in time. Jade Orchid Brothel is already filled with guests and the atmosphere is extremely lively.

The two men have been assigned to a luxuriously furnished lounge and the maids naturally provided excellent service. Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Why does everybody in the brothel seem to be familiar with and going all out to flatter Brother Xie?" Xie Ziyuan proudly explained: "You must not forget that it is compulsory to play Little Brother's compositions here. Moreover, I specially implored Zongsun

Long to book this lounge for me last night. In Lin Zi, everyone has to give face to him.”

At this instance, the supervisor of the brothel, Madam Orchid, entered the room. Smiling widely before uttering a word, she batted her eyelashes seductively and informed: “When Yuan Yuan knows Official Xie is coming to visit her, she is so excited she forgot about everything else. Right now, she is having a shower and applying makeup and will be here shortly. Does Official Xie or Master Shen wish to ask for another two ladies to add to the festivities?”

Although she is approaching middle age, her pleasant grooming, coupled with a good sense of fashion and on top of her well-maintained figure, Madam Orchid is still rather appealing to the eyes. With her mind-blowing eloquence, she exudes a captivating and wanton bearing, arousing excitement in men and provoking dirty thoughts. Scrutinizing her, Xiang Shaolong is full of praise for the Qi Lady. Regardless of their age, they truly possess a unique character. Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi are two shining examples.

Taking in her praise, Xie Ziyuan was laughing with his mouth wide open. He swiftly decided: “No need! We came specially for Miss Yuan.”

Carrying a womanly fragrance, Madam Orchid came to Xie Ziyuan’s side, sitting between the two men. With half her body leaning onto Xie Ziyuan’s body, she placed her lips beside his ear and began whispering secretively.

Observing Xie Ziyuan's intoxicated look, Xiang Shaolong easily deduce that Madam Orchid is sweet-talking him and is telling him things that are pleasing to the ears.

Following that, Xie Ziyuan and Madam Orchid suddenly burst out laughing simultaneously. Only then did she bother to shift her mesmerizing gaze to Xiang Shaolong. She cheerfully offered: "Tonight, Yuan Yuan shall accompany Official Xie. Does Master Shen want me to help you to select a good female companion?"

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly rejected: "I am just accompanying Official Xie."

Madam Orchid did not press on and coquettishly sashayed away.

As foretold, Xie Ziyuan indeed became highly invigorated. Producing a roll of parchment from his bosom, he ordered the maid to deliver some ink and brushes and began composing on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong dared not disturb him and half prone on a soft cushion, pretending to be asleep. The two young and pretty maids are very attentive and well trained. Without any prompting, they started to massage the back and shoulders of the two men. Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, gained a new insight. He is beginning to comprehend the importance of one's status.

Now that he is masquerading as Shen Liang, he is obviously at a different status level compared to Xiang Shaolong. In the past, wherever he went, he would, without a doubt, gain

the attention of the crowd and end up as the centre of attraction. Presently, even Madam Orchid cannot be bothered with him.

In the midst of his thoughts, he actually fell asleep.

In a blurry state, he imagined hearing a soft, gentle as cotton singing of a lady. It was heavenly to his ears.

He could not make out the lyrics of the song but can relish the wonderful sweet sensation in between the words she spouted. He felt as if he is high up floating among the mists and clouds as the tune swayed continuously in a melancholic water ripple and yet feeling light and soothing as if it was a gentle breeze blowing across a grass field.

Xiang Shaolong thought that he was dreaming but when he opened his eyes, he discovered that Lan Gongyuan had arrived and was presently prostrated against Xie Ziyuan's back and lightly singing the song he newly composed.

On a table opposite him sat a sturdy and tall youth. Noticing Xiang Shaolong stirring from his slumber, he gestured a greeting before refocusing his attention to Lan Gongyuan and Xie Ziyuan.

At the end of the song, the young man began clapping: "The song is exhilarating and Miss Yuan is a superb songstress. Xuanhua take my hat off the both of you!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, finally realizing the man in front of him is Zongsun Long's son, Lin Zi's famed swordsman Zongsun Xuanhua.

Leaning back into the bosom of Lan Gongyuan, Xie Ziyuan threw a side glance at Xiang Shaolong, cheerfully exclaiming: "Brother Shen is awake. Let's drink. No one shall go home sober tonight."

Her lovely eyes shifting to Xiang Shaolong, Lan Gongyuan's eyes rotated two rounds before shifting back to Xie Ziyuan. She unyielding protested: "I hereby ban Official Xie from mentioning the word: Home. Allow me do my best to serve you tonight!"

Xie Ziyuan and Zongsun Xuanhua exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

Embarrassed, Xiang Shaolong sat upright and wondered: "How long did Little Brother slept?"

Zongsun Xuanhua laughed: "I have been here for two hours and Brother Shen has been asleep throughout my stay. If not for Miss Yuan's delightful singing, Brother Shen may have continued dozing."

Lan Gongyuan personally poured wine for all three men. With the presence of the Soft Boned Beauty, the ambience of the room is much more lively as if Spring had arrived.

After three rounds of toasting, Lan Gongyuan leaned back into Xie Ziyuan's bosom. Witnessing their intimacy and Lan Gongyuan's clinging, any man would definitely feel jealous.

To Xie Ziyuan, Zongsun Xuanhua sighed: "A beauty paired with a talented gentleman. This is the first time Little Brother has seen Miss Yuan behaving so submissively! Little

Brother has yet to experience Miss Yuan's tender loving care."

Xie Ziyuan is fully intoxicated like a flying immortal and his soul seemed to have left his body.

Inheriting his father's long and narrow face, Zongsun Xuanhua turned to Xiang Shaolong. His chilling eyes flashing, Zongsun Xuanhua insinuated: "Brother Shen's flying dagger skill has left a lasting impression on my father. Little Brother wonders if he has the good fortune to witness it with his own eyes."

Groaning to himself, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You would have to wait till Little Brother recover from my sickness." He then secretly laughed for he would have slipped away by then.

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded his head and replied with sarcasm: "Of course. Ha! Brother Shen is truly lucky to have befriended Official Xie."

Lan Gongyuan was stunned: "Flying Dagger Skill? Young Master Zongsun, can you stop beating around the bush?"

Xie Ziyuan laughed: "It is only a misunderstanding! Miss Yuan, this Brother Shen here is currently the Troupe Manager for Mistress Feng."

Taken aback, Lan Gongyuan glanced towards Xiang Shaolong. Her eyes glowing with additional signs of contempt and arrogance, she acknowledged with a 'Mm' sound but did not pass any comment.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling extremely uncomfortable and was planning to use his illness as an excuse to leave early, Madam Orchid came into the lounge. Passionately sitting down beside Zongsun Xuanhua, she cajoled: "Your servant wishes to borrow Yuan Yuan for thirty minutes. I hope three masters can give me some leeway and don't take it to heart."

Lan Gongyuan wailed: "They may not mind but I do mind! But since Auntie Orchid takes such good care of Yuan Yuan, Yuan Yuan cannot bear to object so I will definitely oblige!"

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong was full of praise. Every single one of these famous courtesans is an expert when it comes to eloquence and mind games. With the flawless coordination between the two of them, how can they voice any objections?

Zongsun Xuanhua is no pushover too. He plainly inquired: "Is it because of Brother Qi Yu?"

Madam Orchid giggled: "Young Master Zongsun has hit the jackpot. He is accompanied by the Qin heavyweight, Great Chancellor Lu."

His eyes flashing with electricity and ice, Zongsun Xuanhua coldly snorted: "If we are talking about Qin heavyweight, the most befitting is Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei? Humph!"

Reacting emotionally, Lan Gongyuan sighed with a breath and stood up from Xie Ziyuan's bosom. She gently swore: "I will just pay my respects and be back before you know it."

Xie Ziyuan hurriedly stood up to send her off and winked at Xiang Shaolong, reassuring: "Miss Yuan need not hold it to heart. It is also time for me to go home."

It is unclear if she is being genuine or just putting on a show when Lan Gongyuan stubbornly remonstrated: "No matter what, I will not let Young Master (XZY) leave. If this is the case, I will remain here."

Turning to Madam Orchid, she questioned: "Who else is accompanying Imperial Uncle (Lu Buwei)?"

This time round, it is Xiang Shaolong who had a big shock. He quickly suggested: "It would not be nice if Miss Yuan refuses to pay your respects!"

Madam Orchid smiled: "After learning that Official Xie and Young Master Zongsun are here, Imperial Uncle is coming over to exchange greetings!" She left after finishing her sentence.

Without a moment's hesitation, Xiang Shaolong apologized: "Little Brother is feeling dizzy and my legs are giving way. Please excuse my early departure. My heartfelt thanks to all three of you for tonight's session."

Ignoring the strange looks from the three of them, Xiang Shaolong strode towards the door in huge steps. The instance he opened the door, he came face to face with Madam Orchid who is escorting a high-spirited Lu Buwei. Behind him are three men, namely Qi Yu, Dan Chu and Han Jie.

As the two men exchanged looks, Lu Buwei's giant frame shook excessively and he halted his footsteps in astonishment, unable to believe that he is staring at his old nemesis Xiang Shaolong.

Han Jie, Qi Yu and Dan Chu have yet to identify Xiang Shaolong. They stared at the two men with surprise.

An ignorant Madam Orchid giggled: "What a coincidence! I happened to run into Imperial Uncle and these fellow masters making their way over here."

Stuck in a dilemma, Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Forcing himself to face the music head on, he smiled and greeted: "Shen Liang pays his respects to Imperial Uncle."

With a complicated look flashing across his eyes, Lu Buwei swiftly resumed his demeanor and loudly chuckled: "Mister Shen resembles an old friend of Lu Buwei, giving me a fright."

Hearing the name Shen Liang, Han Jie's eyes blazed with a murderous aura.

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Lu Buwei has identified himself but has decided not to expose him. He retreated back into the lounge to avoid blocking the entrance. Out of the blue, he can feel his fighting spirits surging to new heights and casting aside all his reservations.

Frankly speaking, he is sick of always pretending to be someone else.

Lu Buwei took the lead to enter the room and everyone including Zongsun Xuanhua hastily stood up to pay their respects. A minute ago, Zongsun Xuanhua had indicated his disrespect for Lu Buwei but right now, he is behaving in an uptight manner. Thus, he was likely stifled by Lu Buwei's reputation and bearing.

Giving up the best seat in the lounge, Xie Ziyuan shifted to Xiang Shaolong's table. As there are only four tables in this room, Xiang Shaolong and Xie Ziyuan had to share a table. Observing Lan Gongyuan clinging onto Xie Ziyuan, Madam Orchid personally served Lu Buwei.

Squeezing between Xiang Shaolong and Xie Ziyuan, Lan Gongyuan suddenly leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and queried in a low voice: "Why is Master Shen still here?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "It would be considered rude if I were to leave now."

Lu Buwei firstly raised his cup to toast everyone and with his second cup, he faced Xiang Shaolong and professed: "Miss Feng is indeed lucky to have Brother Shen Liang managing the Troupe for her!"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lu Buwei has seen through his ruse: Sabotaging his efforts to obtain Feng Fei from within the Song & Dance Troupe. Raising his cup in a return toast, he smiled: "It is nothing. Little Brother is just doing my best!"

Besides the two of them, everybody else was astounded. In terms of status, these two men are worlds apart but ever

since Lu Buwei entered the room, all his attention seemed to be centered around Xiang Shaolong.

Qi Yu, Han Jie and Dan Chu's interaction with Xiang Shaolong is minimal and therefore, they are unable to pinpoint Xiang Shaolong as quickly and as efficiently compared to Lu Buwei. All three men are awfully confused; why is Lu Buwei behaving as if he knows this insignificant character and is placing so much emphasis on him?

Pouring wine for Lu Buwei, Madam Orchid enquired from the side: "Have Imperial Uncle and Mister Shen met before?"

His eyes shining with a deathly killing aura, Lu Buwei plainly state: "We know each other previously and it was truly unexpected to meet under such different circumstances."

Listening to the intense emotion in Lu Buwei's tone, the crowd can sense his 'high valuation' of this Shen Liang and began to reassess their previous judgment of him.

Fully aware that Lu Buwei's brain is filled with thoughts of how to get rid of himself, Xiang Shaolong's mind speedily churned a reply: "I did not expect to meet so many old friends during my Lin Zi trip."

Taking in his words, Lu Buwei was flabbergasted and sank into silence.

Xiang Shaolong obviously understood his predicament. Even if he is ten times braver, he would not dare to plot against him, a Great General of Qin. If Xiao Pan eventually learns

that Lu Buwei did meet him here and subsequently, he, Xiang Shaolong was murdered, Lu Buwei can forget about disassociating himself with the crime.

The only way that Lu Buwei can carry out his nefarious plot is when nobody knows Shen Liang is actually Xiang Shaolong.

He would certainly not reveal this secret to anyone to prevent the news from leaking out, especially to Qi. It would be a disaster for Qi if they are found 'guilty' of harming Xiang Shaolong.

Zongsun Xuanhua is now treating Xiang Shaolong very differently from before. He tested: "I did not realize Brother Shen has such a wide network of friends all over the land. No wonder even Marquis Han and Lord Longyang are considered your acquaintances."

From his comment, Xiang Shaolong instantly concluded that Zongsun Long has planted a spy within the Troupe. For all you know, it could be Sa Li's gang.

Lu Buwei's huge body frame shuddered lightly, appearing to realize that he has lost the opportunity to assassinate Xiang Shaolong. In fact, he even had to resort to protecting him from harm. Otherwise, in the future, he could end up as a target of suspicion or be found guilty of Xiang Shaolong's death. He is at a great disadvantage.

Everybody was staring at Xiang Shaolong, unable to comprehend how did this newly appointed manager of Feng Fei's Song & Dance Troupe managed to gain the friendship and high regards from the heavyweights of various States.

Xiang Shaolong raised his cup and toasted: "It is all due to their kindness. Little Brother toasts every one of you."

Nobody could understand the meaning of his words and returned the toast with a puzzled expression

Only Lu Buwei realize that Xiang Shaolong is warning him not to act rashly. Finishing his drink, he officially proposed: "Is Brother Shen available over the next two days? Can we schedule a time to meet or I can personally pay you a visit?"

When the words left his mouth, everyone present was left with their mouths wide open with astonishment. What is going on? Based on Lu Buwei's status and his usual condescending attitude towards the world as well as his arrogant and self-serving behavior, why would he lower himself to pay a visit to this Shen Liang?

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Not meeting is better than meeting. Imperial Uncle, please reconsider."

Everyone's expression went from shock to speechless, guessing that the relationship between the two of them is not as simple as it meets the eye.

Even Madam Orchid who was pressing her bountiful breasts against Lu Buwei's arm forgot about everything and was sitting with her back straight.

From the side, Lan Gongyuan's captivating eyes stared unblinkingly at Xiang Shaolong, scanning him at a speed that is neither fast nor slow.

His eyes glowing with anger, Lu Buwei lowered his head and glared at the empty cup in his hand. He replied in a deep voice: "Shen Liang is truly Shen Liang. When I heard Mister Shen barging into Zongsun Residence all by himself, I should have guessed that it was this old acquaintance."

Zongsun Xuanhua immediately became uneasy and dryly coughed once.

Cursing inside, Xiang Shaolong knows that Lu Buwei is purposely revisiting the old enmity between himself and the Zongsun Family, even covertly hinting his fake identity to the others. The best outcome would logically be a famed swordsman like Zongsun Xuanhua issuing a challenge to Xiang Shaolong. If Xiang Shaolong perished in an open and fair duel, even Xiao Pan cannot hold Qi responsible. However, Lu Buwei cannot directly expose his true identity and intentionally constructed this confusing statement.

Right now, the lounge is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. From far, the sound of a flute and zither playing can be heard, adding to the awkward atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong simply articulated: "Regarding that incident, it was all due to Brother Zongsun's esteemed father who showed great mercy, coupled with Chancellor Li putting in a good word for me. Otherwise, it would be impossible for Little Brother to be here drinking wine and listening to Miss Yuan's heavenly singing."

Hearing Xiang Shaolong's modest words and giving praise to Zongsun Long, Zongsun Xuanhua's stiff face became relaxed.

Raising his cup, he respectfully clarified: "That... That was only a small misunderstanding!"

Xie Ziyuan finally had the chance to speak up. He laughed: "It is genuinely a small misunderstanding. Let's drink up."

Dan Chu and the others were all feeling doubtful and reluctantly raised their cups and drink the wine while remaining deep in thought. Lan Gongyuan poured wine for Xiang Shaolong first before pouring for the others. With Lan Gongyuan away from her seat and no more obstruction between the two of them, Xiang Shaolong moved to Xie Ziyuan's side and whispered: "Do not forget about Sister in Law's instructions."

Stupefied, Xie Ziyuan exclaimed: "I beg everybody's pardon. Little Brother needs to rush home now!"

CHAPTER 10

No More Hiding

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

WHEN Xiang Shaolong returned to Tingsong Villa, Chi Zichun who is bearing a malicious agenda welcomed him in front of the main courtyard: “Your servant has something to report to Manager.”

Feeling doubtful, Xiang Shaolong checked: “What is it?”

Peering to his left and right, Chi Zichun whispered: “Why don’t we proceed to the garden before we speak further? At the garden, it is less likely to be spotted by the others.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "It is so late; who would spot us?"

Behaving as if he has something serious to reveal, Chi Zichun disclosed: "Actually, I wanted to bring Manager to the garden to witness a rendezvous between two shameless individuals."

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned and wondered if Dong Shuzen was lying earlier despite swearing that she is loyal only to himself. Suppressing his voice, he quizzed: "Is it Second Mistress?"

Chi Zichun nodded his head: "And Sa Li too. It is all due to me paying extra attention to the movement of Gu Ming and company, discovering that they have smuggled Sa Li into the Villa."

His anger rising, Xiang Shaolong icily hissed: "Lead the way!"

A surge of delight flashed past Chi Zichun's face and was gone the next instance. He led Xiang Shaolong to a wide detour around the buildings, following a small path towards the rear garden.

Stepping into the garden, it was all quiet and serene. The moon is shining brightly high up in the sky and there were no signs of human activity.

Growing suspicious, Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Where are they?"

Pointing to a storage hut located far away in the corner of the rear courtyard, Chi Zichun warned: "Right there where we store our firewood. We must take precautions for Gu

Ming or someone else could be stationed nearby to act as a lookout. Manager, please follow me!”

Without waiting for Xiang Shaolong’s acknowledgement, Chi Zichun went around a bush of flowers that was planted on the left side of a pavilion within the rear garden. He is apparently trying to take a small path along the rear wall.

Xiang Shaolong can smell a rat. While it is not surprising if Dong Shuzen and Sa Li are still in cahoots but given the present circumstances, coupled with him voicing his misgivings about Sa Li and herself earlier today, it would be illogical for them to rendezvous under these constraints. As he thought further, an image of Chi Zichun’s earlier delight surfaced in his brain. It is as if he cannot hide his exhilaration at successfully luring Xiang Shaolong into a trap.

Ten odd steps later, Chi Zichun noticed Xiang Shaolong still standing at the same spot and shooed: “Manager, come quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong gestured for him to come back and brought him to the back of a clump of small trees, explaining: “There is something I do not understand.”

Chi Zichun asked: “What is it?”

Pointing to something behind him, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Who is that?”

As Chi Zichun turned around in astonishment, Xiang Shaolong grabbed him from behind and whisked out his dagger, pointing it at Chi Zichun’s throat. He bellowed in a

chilling voice: "Why are you lying to me? I saw Second Mistress in her bedroom with my own eyes."

Chi Zichun begged in a quivering voice: "Master Shen, please spare my life. Your servant is not aware that Second Mistress has returned to her room."

From these words, Xiang Shaolong knows that Chi Zichun is in a state of panic and could not tell that Xiang Shaolong is simply fabricating a lie.

Using a merciless tone, Xiang Shaolong frostily interrogated: "Who is laying an ambush for me? If you dare to say you have no idea, I will instantly cut a section of your throat and let you slowly bleed till death."

Chi Zichun is much more timid than what Xiang Shaolong expected. His entire body trembling, he stammered: "Master Shen, please spare my life. It is Sa Li who forced me to do this."

Recalling that Zongsun Xuanhua is extremely familiar with the Troupe affairs, he had a brainwave and demanded: "How many men did Zongsun Long send to assist Sa Li?"

By now, Chi Zichun is a broken man. He quavered: "So Master Shen knows about everything. Your servant recognizes his mistakes."

Finally discovering the perpetuator behind Sa Li, Xiang Shaolong can feel his body loosening up. Without someone backing him up, Zhu Xiuzhen and Dong Shuzhen would not give a damn about Sa Li. In the same context, those

bootlickers Gu Ming, Fu Yan, etc, would not obey his instructions.

If not for his injury, he would teach Sa Li and the other swordsmen a lesson they would never forget. But if he does not use this opportunity to punish them, it would be letting these despicable cads off too easily.

Pulling out Chi Zichun's belt, Xiang Shaolong used it to tie him up securely. Tearing a portion off Chi Zichun's shirt, he made it into a ball of cloth and stuffed his big mouth with it. He then snuck out and headed towards the firewood hut in a different direction.

Moving without detection and camouflaging his tracks is a daily routine he practices as a member of the Special Forces. He managed to arrive at the vicinity of the firewood hut and the enemies are none the wiser.

Surveying his surrounding, Xiang Shaolong observed that the two door panels facing the garden are slightly ajar. There were another two men laying in ambush on the roof and were armed with bows and arrows. If he had trotted down the path Chi Zichun had recommended, it would be a miracle if he did not end up with countless arrows sticking from his body. After more scrutiny, he discovered that there were men hiding in the trees as well. It is an accurate depiction of: Danger lurking at every corner.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and darted towards the back of the firewood hut. Using a dagger, he stealthily pried open a

window at the back. Pushing the window marginally open, he stared into the hut.

In a short period of time, his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness within the firewood hut. Borrowing some light from the moon, he could barely make out two men hiding in ambush behind every window, ready and waiting in anticipation.

Sa Li's voice happened to sound out: "What is that dog slave Chi Zichun doing? Why is he hiding there with that bastard?"

Another man replied in a deep voice: "Something is not right."

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in the rest of the conversation. Concealing himself at a side, he lighted his fire stick and very quickly dashed to the side of the window, throwing the fire stick towards a pile of dry grass and whatnots.

Cries of help can be heard from within the hut and it was a state of mayhem.

The wooden doors are thrown open as several strongmen pathetically staggered out and began running towards the rear courtyard exit.

Xiang Shaolong leapt out from behind the hut and fiercely roared: "Where do you think you are going!"

Identifying Sa Li, his dagger left his hand.

Letting out a tragic howl, Sa Li crumbled to the ground with an injured calf.

The men on the trees were all jumping down and joining the men from the hut in making their swift escape via the rear exit.

Xiang Shaolong casually strolled over and came to Sa Li who is still lying flat on his face. Using his leg, Xiang Shaolong flipped his body over.

Sa Li wretchedly begged: "Don't kill me!"

As the firewood hut dissolved into a huge ball of fire, it clearly illuminates Sa Li's cowardly expression. It was as ugly as a toad.

Feng Fei blew her top and immediately fired all Troupe members who are in cahoots with Sa Li or are spying for him. Tying Sa Li securely like a giant mummy, Feng Fei is going to deliver him to the King of Qi tomorrow morning and demand justice to be served.

By the time Sa Li was escorted away, it is already past midnight. Feng Fei requested Xiang Shaolong to accompany her back to the main building. When they are alone in the small sitting room of the upper floor, Feng Fei retorted with sarcasm: "I thought Manager Shen is so sick he was confined to his bed? In the blink of an eye, he had slipped out with Xie Ziyuan to have a good time and even showcased his mighty prowess in capturing a villain and delivering justice."

Xiang Shaolong is completely drained of energy and is leaning against his chair. He simply remarked: "I saw your lover just now."

With her back to him as Feng Fei glanced out of the window, she calmly replied: "From tonight onwards, Feng Fei no longer has a lover and will never have one in the future."

Xiang Shaolong can detect the sensations of grief and pain in her tone. He sighed: "Aren't you overreacting?"

Feng Fei shook her head and denied: "You would not understand. I did bring up Zongsun Long's issue to him and implored him to intercede for me since he is the Elder Martial Brother of Zongsun Xuanhua but he flatly rejected me. At the same time, he swore to me he would never meet Zongsun Xuanhua privately. Aye!"

She melancholically added: "Feng Fei's heart is dead and only wishes to find a secluded place and live the rest of my life in tranquility. I want nothing to do with all the fame and glamour."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "That is my ideal dream as well. I have grown sick of all the wars and revenge killings."

Feng Fei turned her petite frame around and stared at him viciously, declaring: "Finally willing to tell the truth? Feng Fei already guessed you are such a man."

Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered and offered: "Whatever. If Mistress is agreeable to letting Second Mistress become

your successor, I can guarantee that Mistress will realize your dream.”

Feng Fei challenged: “On what basis are you offering this guarantee?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Based on the three words: Xiang Shaolong. Is it sufficient?”

As Feng Fei’s fragrant body shuddered uncontrollably, her eyes are shining with utter disbelief. Bewildered, she gazed at Xiang Shaolong for a long long time before collapsing onto a chair, exclaiming: “You have got to be kidding me!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If it is anyone but me, Little Brother would not be petrified upon seeing the poisonous ring when Mistress came to ask about my illness and was forced to reveal the secret meeting between Han Jie and Zongsun Xuanhua.”

With considerable embarrassment, Feng Fei lowered her head. Lost and confused, she muttered: “Feng Fei did not treat you kindly; why are you still helping me?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Mistress originally is not evil in nature. It is just due to constant interaction with people who are harbouring evil designs on Mistress. Thus, you do not trust anyone easily!”

Feng Fei dejectedly wondered: “What should I do now?”

Xiang Shaolong highlighted: “Earlier tonight, Lu Buwei has learnt that Shen Liang is in fact Xiang Shaolong is disguise. Therefore, continuing this masquerade is not beneficial but

harmful instead. Tomorrow, I might as well seek an audience with the King of Qi as Xiang Shaolong. By then, anyone who wishes to lay their hands on you would have to reconsider the consequences.”

Feng Fei was taken aback: “Aren’t you afraid of being assassinated?”

Xiang Shaolong boisterously laughed: “If anything were to happen to me here, Qi cannot claim ignorance. I have grown to detest a life of lies and deceit. Right now, I miss my home terribly and my only wish is to return home as soon as possible to reunite with my wives and son. If Mistress wishes to settle down in Qin, I can guarantee it will be done.”

With hot tears flowing down her cheeks, Feng Fei softly grieved: “Feng Fei’s heart is dead. I shall adhere to Great General’s arrangements.”

Before Xiang Shaolong could accumulate enough sleep the next morning, someone roused him from his slumber, saying that Zongsun Xuanhua is waiting for him in the main hall.

Recalling Sa Li’s issue, he had a good grasp of the situation and proceeded to the hall to meet Zongsun Xuanhua. As anticipated, after a round of pleasantries, Zongsun Xuanhua immediately went to straight to the point: “Little Brother has an inappropriate request and prayed that Brother Shen will grant this allowance to my Zongsun Family.”

Xiang Shaolong knows what he is up to. After observing Lu Buwei’s attitude towards himself last night, Zongsun Xuanhua is now having a better opinion of him. Moreover,

Xie Ziyuan is a good friend of him as well and has decided to back down from the flying dagger issue. Now that Xiang Shaolong has a chance to do Zongsun Xuanhua a big favour, he smiled: "With Brother Zongsun's words, I, Shen Liang, would never disagree. Sa Li will be handed over to Brother Zongsun and no further words are necessary."

(meaning that there is no need to say thanks)

Zongsun Xuanhua did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be so easygoing and reached out with a hand of friendship: "Brother Shen is now my buddy."

Stretching out his own hand to grab Zongsun Xuanhua's hand, Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "Little Brother has always regarded Brother Zongsun as a friend."

Before Zongsun Xuanhua could reply, Fei Chun barged in with a flustered expression and reported: "Qin's Imperial Uncle Lu Buwei is here to look for Manager!"

Zongsun Xuanhua did not expect Lu Buwei to really come looking for Xiang Shaolong. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong had openly hinted he did not wish to see him. Utterly shocked, he stared at Xiang Shaolong in a daze.

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong assured; "Brother Zongsun should have guessed that Shen Liang is just an alias of Little Brother. Let's have a detailed discussion in the future!"

With skepticism written all over his face, Zongsun Xuanhua slipped out from the rear exit.

Lu Buwei's grand arrival has every single troupe member buzzing with excitement. Except for Feng Fei who has seen it coming, the rest are still feeling puzzled.

The moment this world famous Qin Imperial Uncle stepped in, he requested to speak with Xiang Shaolong privately. Once everybody else has retreated from the hall, Lu Buwei let out a long sigh: "Shaolong is truly amazing to disguise yourself as Shen Liang and hide yourself in Lin Zi."

Xiang Shaolong plainly questioned: "Have I caused Imperial Uncle a great deal of disappointment?"

His two eyes flashing a chilly aura, Lu Buwei stared at him and promised: "Shaolong, why are you speaking like this? The Crown Prince is worried sick over your survival. Now that I have ran into Shaolong, I will definitely do my best to protect and escort Shaolong back to Xianyang. I am here today to ask about your plans."

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "We shall discuss about it later. Now that I do not have a valid reason to continue my disguise, I hope Imperial Uncle could officially notify the King of Qi about my presence and allow me to seek an audience with him."

After a moment's contemplation, Lu Buwei sighed again: "Why did our relationship degenerate to such a terrible state?"

Xiang Shaolong sarcastically replied: "It doesn't seem like I am the correct person to blame."

Lu Buwei conceded: "It is my fault and I only wish to know if there is a way to redeem our relationship. As long as we work hand in hand to assist Crown Prince Zheng, all the lands would eventually end up as Qin territory."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock.

He knows Lu Buwei's character extremely well; a strong willed man who always rises to the occasion and would never admit defeat or his wrongdoings in any situation. For him to behave in such a submissive manner, it only indicates that he has gotten a trump card and is temporary making peace with himself.

What formidable scheme has he formulated?

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "From the beginning till the end, I, Xiang Shaolong, have always been a peace loving man and was forced by circumstances to retaliate. The differences between the two of us can no longer be resolved by just bare words."

Putting on an earnest face, Lu Buwei clarified: "Imperial Uncle would not hold it against Shaolong for having such thoughts. Back then, Imperial Uncle had wanted to marry Niangrong to Shaolong, expressing my sincerity to repair the ties between us. That obstinate daughter refused to obey me and ruined my plan."

Pausing, he glared at Xiang Shaolong and slowly avowed: "Right now, Imperial Uncle will inform the King of Qi about Shaolong's presence. Shaolong, please give some thought about Imperial Uncle's words. Even if Shaolong is unwilling

to forgive me, Imperial Uncle has made up my mind to forget about all the disputes I have with Shaolong. Time shall be my witness.”

After Lu Buwei took his leave, Xiang Shaolong is still sitting in a daze.

He is one hundred percent certain that Lu Buwei has come up with a plan to kill himself, explaining his pretense at making amends. If he is unable to expose the murderous plot, he could incur a terrible defeat.

Even if he, Xiang Shaolong, is dead, as long as Xiao Pan is still alive, Lu Buwei cannot consider his victory to be a complete triumphant. Thinking about this point, his entire body suddenly broke out in cold sweat.

He believes he has discovered Lu Buwei's trump card. It is the only but deadly loophole that can cause immediate and total devastation to Xiao Pan and him, Xiang Shaolong: The truth behind Xiao Pan's birth.

Via Zhu Ji, Lao Ai could learn about the process and could also retrieve the address of the couple who had raised the 'real Yingzheng'. After bringing the couple back to Xianyang and spilling the beans, not only would Xiao Pan lose the throne, Xiang Shaolong himself would be found guilty of treason.

But looking at it from another direction, if this had indeed happened, Qin Shihuang would not have appeared in the records of history.

Despite guessing correctly about Lu Buwei's trump card, there is nothing he can do to stop it due to time constraints. He can only live according to fate and pray that history cannot be altered.

Although he is adopting this mindset, his heart is still filled with anxiety, causing him much irritation. He nearly wanted to beat his own chest and shout out loud to vent the frustration amassing in his heart.

At this juncture, Feng Fei came into the hall and gracefully sat down beside him. She suggested in a low voice: "Shall we make clear our intentions to Shuzen and the others?"

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his turbulent emotions and nodded in agreement.

After several trials and tribulations, the affairs plaguing the Song & Dance Troupe are more or less resolved. However, regarding his personal troubles, this is just the beginning. Presently, he has lost all interest to stay in Lin Zi and only wishes to return to Xianyang as early as possible and join hands with Xiao Pan to manage his 'Identity Crisis'. How long must he wait before he can enjoy days of peace?

CHAPTER 11

Meeting the King of Qi

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

WITH a serious expression, Xiao Yuetan is helping to restore Xiang Shaolong original appearance while the latter is weighed down by troubling thoughts, causing the tension in the room to be very heavy.

Finally noticing Xiao Yuetan's serious demeanor, Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "What is bothering Elder Brother?"

Xiao Yuetan sighed with a breath: "I am only too familiar with Lu Buwei's methods. He would never allow you to

return to Xianyang alive. The more pleasant his words are, the more brutal the methods he will employ.”

Xiang Shaolong was instead worried about Xiao Pan's identity crisis, secretly blaming himself for being too slow to realize that the moment Lu Buwei and Lao Ai joined forces, this would be a loophole they would exploit sooner or later. To make it worse, he could not get other people to help out and get them involved in this matter.

Xiao Yuetan continued: “Given the current situation, it is difficult for me to lend a hand. On one side, we have Li Yuan, Han Chuang and Guo Kai who are scheming to get rid of you and on the other side, we have Lu Buwei and Tian Dan who wants to murder you. Your situation is a hundred times more perilous than before. If they can stage an accident, for example: a house collapsing or a ship sunk by huge waves and strong wind, it would be impossible for Crown Prince to hold anyone responsible.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Lord Longyang, concluding that he could be the only person who can save him now. However, he did not understand why is he not back with any news yet? Logically, after he has tested Han Chuang, he should make his way back to give his report. Is there more than meets the eye? Contrary to his thoughts, he assured Xiao Yuetan: “At least I will be safe in Lin Zi because no one would dare to openly assassinate me.”

Xiao Yuetan reasoned: “That is hard to say. If Tian Dan arranged for someone to challenge you to a duel and kill you

in the process, it would be an uphill task for Crown Prince Zheng to avenge you. How is your injury?"

Peering into the bronze mirror at his familiar and yet unfamiliar original appearance, Xiang Shaolong flexed his shoulder muscles and determined: "I should make a full recovery in a maximum of three days."

Xiao Yuetan reminded: "It is no longer convenient for me to visit you on such a regular basis, for it may arouse Han Chuang's suspicions. Aye. With these new developments, I am really worried."

A subordinate came in at this time to report that Lord Longyang is here.

Receiving Lord Longyang in the East Hall and sharing with him the intention to end his masquerade, Lord Longyang was badly shocked and he professed in a troubled tone: "This has greatly complicated matters."

Xiang Shaolong do not wish to expend further energy on this bothersome issue and questioned him about Han Chuang's reaction. Lord Longyang firstly lowered his head and contemplated for a short while before raising his head and gazed at him, suggesting: "Is it possible that Cao Cuidao coincidently happened to be there when you are about to steal your sabre?"

Xiang Shaolong resolutely shook his head and affirmed: "Impossible. He personally informed me that someone has tipped him off. What did Han Chuang say?"

With his eyes glowing with distress, Lord Longyang replied in a low voice: "I proceeded accordingly to the plan and suggested to Han Chuang about hatching a plot against you but received an earful from him instead. It seems like he was not the one who betrayed Shaolong. Could Shaolong have forgotten somebody else he may have revealed this matter to?"

Xiang Shaolong could only think of Xiao Yuetan and immediately strike out this possibility. He quizzed further: "Is it possible for Han Chuang to see through Your Lordship's ruse to test him?"

Lord Longyang attested: "I can feel that he is not putting on an act. We have been friends for so many years and it would be rather tough for him to successfully deceive me. This affair is indeed baffling."

Xiang Shaolong grew hopeful. If Li Yuan, Han Chuang and Lord Longyang are on the same side of the fence as him, it would be a walk in the park for him to arrive safely in Xianyang.

Lord Longyang reassured: "Shaolong need not fret. No matter what happens, I will always been on your side. Why don't we make plans to leave tonight? Once we have reached Wei, I will have a way to send you back to Qin."

Xiang Shaolong was visibly tempted. He mused: "But what about Feng Fei and the others?"

Lord Longyang recommended: "If you can leave a letter to Han Chuang or Li Yuan, imploring him to watch over them on

your behalf, I am sure they will follow your instructions despite whatever plans they already have in mind.”

Xiang Shaolong is even more motivated than before and asked about the road conditions. Lord Longyang swore: “For the past two days, the weather has become significantly warmer and absent of snow. The river should have thawed by now. I will use an excuse to deploy a ship to send you off and I guarantee that even if someone wishes to pursue you after your departure, it will only be a futile attempt.”

Firstly, Xiang Shaolong is desperate to go home and secondly, Lin Zi is not an ideal place to continue loitering. He ultimately agreed to Lord Longyang’s offer and finalized the details of his escape tonight. At this point in time, Han Jie and Dan Chu arrived together and announced that it is time to enter the palace and meet the King of Qi.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is entering Small City from Big City as he headed north towards the palace on a carriage. Along the way, he observed that the buildings are much more imposing compared to the largely residential Big City.

Lined along both sides of the highway are enormous mansions of the rich and powerful or high-ranking officials, coupled with numerous state buildings, all radiating with a luxurious and grand aura, majestic and magnificently designed.

The two men Dan Chu and Han Jie are behaving very respectfully on the surface, courteous and accommodating.

Dan Chu even provided a travel commentary and introduced the various sights and buildings along the way.

Arriving at the palace, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan came up together and welcomed him as per standard diplomatic courtesy.

Concluding the usual pleasantries, Tian Dan, who still retained his heroic air, let out a chuckle: “Regardless of Great General’s ally or enemy, everyone is full of admiration for Great General. The world would be a much more boring place without someone as earth shattering as Great General.”

Regaining his past grandeur, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Life is but a game. Witnessing Chancellor Tian’s open mindedness, Shaolong should be the one expressing admiration.” At the same time, he observed that Tian Dan is already displaying signs of aging and vulnerability, a far cry from his young and valiant days.

Putting on an act of sincerity and intimacy, Lu Buwei suggested: “We are all old friends and since the Great King is anxious to speak to Shaolong, let’s talk further at the welcoming banquet Chancellor Tian will host for Shaolong.”

King Qi Xiang will be meeting Xiang Shaolong at the most outstanding structure within the palace: Henggong Pavilion. It is also the same place where Feng Fei will be performing and the birthday banquet will be held three days later.

Henggong Pavilion is the most remarkable cluster of buildings within the royal grounds. It is situated at the

northwest area of Small City and is only 800 feet away from the Small City west wall. It can be considered tall and overwhelming. The rectangular shaped pavilion measures 250 feet in length from south to north and about 200 feet in width from east to west. It stands at a height of about 50 feet and its brilliance is unimaginable. From the top of the pavilion, one could view the colossal parade square located between Henggong Pavilion and Golden Imperial Palace that could accommodate ten thousand soldiers executing their drills.

Henggong Pavilion itself is quite unique and resembles a pyramid with a flat top. There are two storeys at the tip of the pavilion and the three corners of east, west and north is inclined at a sharp angle while the south side is less steep. From the bottom to the top of the pavilion are one hundred stone steps and on the pavilion top, grey bricks are stacked in a certain manner to create a distinctive pattern. In the middle of the pavilion top is a squarish stage about 5 feet tall and the flooring of the stage is lined with mosaic tiles, exuding an impressive and elegant sensation.

The King of Qi is waiting at the lower deck of Henggong Pavilion, which is also known as Dianjiang Hall, to meet Xiang Shaolong. Accompanying him are First Prince Tian Sheng and Second Prince Tian Jian.

King Qi Xiang is around seventy years of age, short and overweight. With a lethargic expression, he looks as if he will breathe his last anytime.

Both princes Tian Sheng and Tian Jian are of medium built and share limited resemblance. Despite their royal heritage, they are ordinary looking and do not possess the bearing of a King. If held in comparison, Tian Sheng has the typical playboy look who had overindulged in alcohol and women while Tian Jian is much more energetic looking.

The ambience is unexpectedly relaxing and friendly.

After paying their respects, Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei sat down in front of the King of Qi but at a lower level while Tian Sheng, Tian Jian and Tian Dan sat at the side.

Using his blurred eyesight to scrutinize and assess Xiang Shaolong, the King of Qi then began to laugh and articulate from his elevated throne: "In the past when Zhang Yi visited Chu as a guest, he attended a banquet where they are showcasing the national treasure of Chu, a jade disc. The jade disc was passed around and was abruptly stolen. Someone suspected Zhang Yi to be the culprit and gave him a beating. When Zhang Yi got home, he asked his wife if his tongue is still there. He declared that as long as he still has his tongue, there is nothing he would fear. Ha..."

(jade disc
<http://www.google.com/search?q=和氏璧&s...w=1439&bih=780>)

Everyone laughed along in a flustered manner although they do not have a clue why he is sharing this story.

The King of Qi gladly added: "Based on his tongue (eloquence) which was not severed in the beating, he was made a marquis and eventually became the Chancellor. Based on the sword in your hand, Great General Xiang was promoted to Great General. A tongue in the past, a sword in the present. Both have been used to achieve greatness."

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is confronted with the weird imagination of the Qi populace. He responded: "The Great King has made an excellent comparison."

Tian Sheng laughed: "However, Great General has switched to using the long dagger he created and has abandoned his sword."

The King of Qi shot Tian Sheng a glare and countered with annoyance: "Are you hinting that I am ignorant? I have already sent someone to retrieve Great General's precious weapon."

This time round, it is Xiang Shaolong's turn to feel extremely awkward. He opened his mouth and wanted to say something but did not know how to express himself. He cannot possibly reveal that he himself has already stolen his sabre and even received a stab from Cao Cuidao's sword. Concurrently, he could see for himself the hostile relationship between the King of Qi and First Prince Tian Sheng. No wonder Tian Dan made a last minute turnaround and switched to Tian Jian instead. But judging from Tian Dan's feeble appearance, he would not outlive King Qi Xiang for long.

King Qi Xiang is in the mood to chat and began talking nonstop: "Ever since the late King launched the campaign 'Dominate Barbarians and Be their King', we, Great Qi, bear the ambition to surround the world, living peacefully regardless of whether one is civilised or uncivilized. When Qin underwent reform to introduce the rule of law, the two countries Qi and Qin have become the two large states with one in the east and one in the west. It is obvious that cooperation is mutually beneficial and estrangement will only bring about harm. This time round, with Imperial Uncle making a personal trip and Great General as a guest, it serves to reinforce the close ties between the two States. This is the best present I could ever ask for."

Within the hall, every person has a different expression written on his face. Tian Sheng who had just been reprimanded by his King father kept his head low and was fearfully quiet. Tian Jian's eyes are shining with passion as he stared at Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei may be laughing along but his body language is very unnatural. Tian Dan is still maintaining his deep and unfathomable outlook, possibly concealing a hidden agenda.

At this moment, a nearby official walked up to the throne. Kneeling down, he passed a letter to the King of Qi and whispered a few words to him.

Surprised at the words he heard, the King of Qi looked over to Xiang Shaolong and revealed: "Grandmaster Cao says he has already returned the precious weapon to Great General.

He has also a letter here that he wishes me to pass it to Great General.”

Tian Dan was taken aback: “What is going on? Has Great General met up with Grandmaster Cao?”

Feeling exceedingly uncomfortable, Xiang Shaolong gingerly nodded his head.

The King of Qi got the inner official to pass the letter to Xiang Shaolong. After opening and reading the letter, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Since Grandmaster Cao has a favourable opinion of Great General, he has invited Great General to Qixia College’s Stargazing Pavilion on the day after the birthday banquet to exchange pointers. It is truly an honour for Great General.”

While the faces of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei flashed quickly with delight, the King of Qi trembled excessively and his face turned ashen white.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly humoured. Three days later he would be safely in the territory of Wei; even if others jeer at him for being afraid of Cao Cuidao, he would not give a hoot.

There are only two men he dreaded meeting. One of them is Li Mu and the other one is the fear-inducing Cao Cuidao.

The minute Xiang Shaolong left Henggong Pavilion, he was intercepted by Xie Ziyuan. Dragging him to one side, Xie Ziyuan gasped: “Great General has deceived Little Brother thoroughly, so you...”

Firstly winking at Xie Ziyuan (to hint that it is inconvenient), Xiang Shaolong then paid his respects to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei: "Great General dare not bother the two of you any further and will leave the palace by myself!"

Tian Dan nodded: "Let's find some time to catch up over the new few days." Finishing, he left with Lu Buwei.

Scrutinizing Xiang Shaolong's chiseled features, Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Brother Xiang is indeed handsome looking and outstanding."

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men strolled out of the palace gate. Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Brother Xie is certainly well-informed."

Xie Ziyuan proudly affirmed: "Nothing in the palace can escape my detection."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed: "In this case, are you aware that Cao Cuidao has just issued a challenge to Little Brother, fixing the duel at Qixia's Stargazing Pavilion four days later? In addition, no one is allowed to witness the battle."

His face losing colour, Xie Ziyuan was petrified: "What should we do? Aye, to think you can still smile at a time like this."

Xiang Shaolong of course knows that he can still smile because he is going to slip away tonight and it would be a different outcome four days later. He consoled: "Worse to worse, I will just discard my sword and admit defeat. Will he still kill me after that?"

Xie Ziyuan was horrified: "Wouldn't Yingzheng be upset if Brother Xiang really abandon the fight?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that he is representing the glory of Qin and forsaking the fight is certainly not an option. However, escaping for his life is a totally different perspective.

After all, anything is better than dying under the merciless blade of Cao Cuidao. Suppressing his voice, he assured: "Brother naturally has a way to resolve the problem. Brother Xie need not worry for me."

Xie Ziyuan bitterly laughed: "I would be lying if I say I am not worried. Grandmaster Cao's sword skills have reached an immeasurable level and countless well-known master swordsmen are like children challenging adults when dueling him; they can barely defend themselves."

Xiang Shaolong deeply understood that sensation. Arriving at the carriage parking lot, an attendant pulled the carriage door open for the two men to board.

After they sat down, the horse carriage started to move.

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Where are we heading?"

Xie Ziyuan disclosed: "To see Zongsun Long. He wishes to apologise to Brother Xiang in person."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong can feel his emotions stirring. Life has its ups and downs; human feelings have its warmth and coldness. What an apt description!

Ever since he has resumed his Xiang Shaolong persona, the entire environment seems to have changed. Within the Song & Dance Troupe, everyone is worshiping him like a deity and going all out to get into his good books.

On the other hand, as Shen Liang, he can witness the more genuine side of their characters.

Xie Ziyuan added: "Once the Zongsun father and son knows that you are Xiang Shaolong, they are exhilarated and quickly begged me to plead with Brother Xiang, inviting you to join hands with them to oppose Lu Buwei. With Brother Xiang on our side, the Second Prince may change his mind once again."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Can Brother Xie arrange for me to meet the Second Prince today? I am doing this not for the Zongsun father and son but for Brother Xie."

Xie Ziyuan was visibly touched and decided: "Brother Xiang is a true friend indeed! I shall fix the appointment to be tonight!"

Looking at the streets through the window, Xiang Shaolong observed the people of Qi busy sweeping snow off the roads and property. The harsh winter is nearly over.

Contradicting their usual habits, Zongsun Long and his son are waiting for them at the door with overwhelming friendliness.

Xiang Shaolong has become their only savior.

To the people of Qi, there is nothing more critical than maintaining good relations with Qin. Only then can Qi occupy the lands of their nemesis Yan without any distractions and slowly expand their territory and eventually uniting the lands.

The reason why Tian Dan can wrest control of Tian Jian from the hands of Zongsun Long is purely because he has Lu Buwei, this ace card.

If Xiang Shaolong who wields greater influence over Yingzheng compared to Lu Buwei decides to stand on Zongsun Long's side, Tian Jian need not switch sides to Tian Dan who had previously supported his own brother.

With this given circumstances, Zongsun Long is naturally treating Xiang Shaolong with utmost hospitality.

Seating themselves in the main hall, Zongsun Long firstly apologise to Xiang Shaolong. Before he could say anything more, Xiang Shaolong declared ahead of him: "Whether privately or officially, I, Xiang Shaolong, will do my best for Brother Xie and Master Long. There is no need for any pleasantries."

Zongsun Long father and son were deliriously happy.

Xie Ziyuan wondered: "Little Brother will enter the palace immediately and seek an audience with Second Prince to make the necessary arrangements for tonight's banquet. Where is a good place to hold it?"

Zongsun Long decided after a quick analysis: "Why don't we have it at Jade Orchid Brothel? Over there, the ambience is more relaxing"

Xie Ziyuan was ecstatic: "Yes. That is a very good place."

To Xiang Shaolong, Zongsun Xuanhua presented: "Xuanhua has specially selected a batch of top rated swordsmen and will assign them to Great General to use at your disposal. Their integrity and character are above suspicion. While Great General is in Lin Zi, they will only take orders from Great General."

Xiang Shaolong thanked: "Brother Zongsun is really considerate. However, can this arrangement be postponed until tomorrow?" In his mind, he was thinking that he'll be long gone by tomorrow.

Zongsun Xuanhua respectfully consented: "We shall adhere to Great General's instructions."

He then frowned: "I heard my Master has issued a challenge to Great General. This is indeed troubling. Xuanhua will pay his respects to Master later and will try to persuade him to retract his challenge."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and dismissed: "There is no need to go to such an extent. Your Master's decision is something even your Great King is unable to influence. Moreover, Little Brother is interested to try out Grandmaster's Cao ultimate swordplay."

Zongsun Long anxiously stammered: "Grandmaster Cao may be a nice and approachable person but once his sword leaves its sheathe, he becomes a heartless fighter. If Great General happens to meet with some misfortune, that will... Aye!"

If he had not tasted Cao Cuidao's prowess before and someone like Zongsun Long is speaking as if he would surely lose, Xiang Shaolong would be greatly offended. Presently, he obviously would not react the same way. He laughed: "I have my ways of keeping myself safe. Master Long need not fret."

Zongsun Xuanhua had a brainwave and exclaimed: "Why don't Martial Sister and myself visit Master together? He is most fond of Martial Sister and may make an exception, altering the duel to a friendly match just to exchange pointers."

Xiang Shaolong has his own plans and smiled: "I really do not require any help from you. Brother Zongsun is a fellow swordsman and should understand how a swordsman think!"

Deflated, Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: "Great General is truly one of a kind. Master has lost interest in dueling a long time ago and only Great General is able to stir his fighting spirit. It must be partly due to Great General's precious sabre."

Zongsun Long reminded: "Brother Xiang is remarkably famous. In my opinion, I think Xuanhua had better warn the two troublemakers Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang. It would

be hard to resist if they come forward and challenge Brother Xiang too.”

His eyes blazing with a chilling aura, Zongsun Xuanhua coldly grunted: “If they are thinking of dueling with Great General, they will have to contend with me, Zongsun Xuanhua, first.”

Since he is running away tonight, Xiang Shaolong leisurely proclaimed: “It is all right as I could use some practice with my sabre. Brother Zongsun is too kind.”

With a mixture of hero worship and admiration, Zongsun Xuanhua respectfully and solemnly suggested: “Now wonder the whole of Xianyang is in awe of Great General. Just be simply observing Great General’s open mindedness and indomitable aura, one can deduce that Great General’s sabre skills have attained a godly state. Xuanhua can only admit defeat. Nevertheless, if there is an opportunity, Xuanhua hopes Great General can give Xuanhua some pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong exposed: “Brother Zongsun is really itching for a fight or is he trying to gauge Little Brother’s skills in order to decide to beg your Master to let me off or not?”

With Xiang Shaolong seeing through his ruse, Zongsun Xuanhua’s face turned red and he awkwardly insisted: “Great General must be kidding. Xuanhua is sincere in learning from Great General.”

Zongsun Long abruptly apologized: “I, Zongsun Long, would like to use this opportunity to bare my soul to Great General, hereby swearing that I no longer bear any ulterior motives towards Miss Feng Fei. If I break my word, may I, Zongsun

Long, die in the wilderness with an exposed corpse. Will Great General please relay this message to her and tell Mistress I, Zongsun Long, is truly sorry.”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and checked: “Little Brother may have to leave Lin Zi before Mistress. I may have to trouble Master Long to protect Mistress on Little Brother’s behalf.”

Thumping his chest, Zongsun Long swore: “You can count on me, Zongsun Long. Great General can put your mind at ease.”

The aggressor is now the protector. Life is indeed unpredictable.

Xie Ziyuan’s body shuddered once and he recommended: “Why don’t Brother Xiang find an excuse to return to Qin before the duel with Grandmaster Cao? That would solve everything without a hitch.”

Zongsun Xuanhua was the first to praise: “You can lie that your Father in law is sick. With this justification, no one would blame Great General for missing the appointment.”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong could not agree more and this scenario best depicts: Only a hero will recognize another hero. Pleased, he ended: “We shall decide further after discussing with Second Prince tonight.”

Noting that he did not reject this idea, the other three men could finally calm down.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and bid farewell. Zongsun Long ‘reluctantly’ send him all the way to the main entrance

before the other two men, Zongsun Xuanhua and Xie Ziyuan accompanied him back to Tingsong Villa.

CHAPTER 12

Dilemma

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

BACK at Tingsong Villa, Fei Chun came up to welcome him: "Reporting Master Xiang, the two men, Zhang Quan and Kun Shan have left."

Xiang Shaolong has forgotten about these two men and was stunned upon hearing this news. He interrogated: "Did they take any luggage with them?"

His hands relaxed by the side, Fei Chun respectfully replied: "Their belongings took up two carriages. Mistress knows about it too."

Secretly acknowledging that the cleanup is now completed, Xiang Shaolong is about to return to his room when Fei Chun awkwardly questioned: "Master Xiang, after the disbandment of the Song & Dance Troupe, can our band of brothers throw in our lot with you?"

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong advised: "The Song & Dance Troupe would not be disbanded. You guys should do your best and support Second Mistress. Touring the various States is much better than cooping yourself in one place." Finishing his sentence, he began to climb the stairs leading to the main hall.

Fei Chun caught up to him and added: "First Mistress and Second Mistress are looking for you. And there is Miss Xinyue too. Oh, it nearly slipped my mind; Mister Tan is here as well and is waiting for Master Xiang in the East Hall. He says it is a matter of life and death!"

Although he is now more popular than before, Xiang Shaolong is feeling more troublesome instead. He naturally went to look for Xiao Yuetan first.

Standing in front of the window, a dazed Xiao Yuetan was staring at the garden scenery beyond the window with his arms akimbo. Until Xiang Shaolong arrived at his back did he calmly divulge: "Shaolong, I have a piece of terrible news for you."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and enquired: "What terrible news?"

Xiao Yuetan described: "Today, I disguised myself and stalked Han Chuang. This ingrate actually went to visit Guo Kai in secret. They had a two hour discussion before he finally left."

His heart swelling with a sour feeling, Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: I do not offend others; yet others try to offend me. What more can I say? This fella is getting better and better. Even Lord Longyang has been deceived by him. He cannot be bothered and replied: "It doesn't matter anymore. I will be leaving tonight. Lord Longyang has arranged everything for me."

Turning his body around, Xiao Yuetan used his hands and grabbed both of Xiang Shaolong's shoulders. He seriously remarked: "How do you expect to leave? Both the river and roads have been blockaded by heavy snow. Lord Longyang and Han Chuang are in it together. Both of them are after your life!"

He continued: "The reason for my suspicion is because Lord Longyang came to visit Han Chuang. After a short discussion, Han Chuang then left to look for Guo Kai. What do you think they are up to?"

His face drained of colour, Xiang Shaolong stammered: "What?"

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Shaolong, you are too trusting with your friends. You must understand that when the interests of the Country and the glory or shame, life or death of their entire clan is concerned, every strand of relationship will be

cast aside. To the people of the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), the three words Xiang Shaolong is equivalent to their Soul Reaper. Only with your demise can they put their mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head turning numb. If he does not leave, he would have to face Cao Cuidao’s godly swordplay and handle other annoying issues.

He decided: “I will leave by myself.”

Xiao Yuetan disagreed: “Your arm injury has yet to recover fully. Leaving now is too dangerous.”

Pausing, he continued: “I heard Cao Cuidao has issued a challenge to you. Are you leaving and forsaking the duel?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “What else can I do? Elder Brother is well-informed indeed.”

Xiao Yuatan warned: “It is not that I am well-informed but there is someone intentionally spreading this news, announcing this to the whole city and making it difficult for you to avoid this battle. Aye, did you ever think that if you had really slipped away, it would be significantly detrimental to yourself? Lu Buwei will definitely make a big hoo ha over this matter and damage your revered status among the Qin military.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “You are asking me to fight Cao Cuidao despite knowing that I will surely get killed?”

Xiao Yuetan reasoned: “Based on your current disposition, you will lose without a doubt. But since he personally issued

the challenge, he must have regarded you as a worthy adversary.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “It could be Lu Buwei who ordered Han Jie to invite him to issue this challenge to me.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed: “You are saying this because you do not understand Cao Cuidao. There is no one in this world who can influence him. With a passion for sword fighting, he toured the land since he was young, looking for challengers to better himself. After the age of twenty five, he has yet to taste defeat and ultimately gained the admirable title of Sword Saint.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: “And you are still asking me to fight him?”

Xiao Yuetan officially articulated: “I am just being realistic. The population of Qin values the glory of its military and swordsmen. You can afford to lose but you cannot afford to run away from the duel. The impact on your reputation is beyond imagination. Maybe you can persuade Cao Cuidao to limit the fight to ten strokes. That may perhaps create a win win scenario and both parties can maintain their personal standing without committing offence.”

Xiang Shaolong is highly enthusiastic and nodded: “Why don’t I make an official petition to the King of Qi. Of course I will be tactful about it and mention stuff like not wanting anybody to be hurt, etc.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Why don’t we write directly to Cao Cuidao? Since this old

fella is unable to overcome you the last time, it must surely bug him and he may approve of this condition. Moreover, if nobody else knows about this arrangement and you manage to successfully deflect ten strokes from him, everyone would have the impression that you are evenly matched with Old Cao. This will enhance your reputation significantly without any side effects.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Cao Cuidao may have studied and understood his sabre moves and it will not be a repeat of their first encounter when he could only defend without attacking. He dejectedly mused: “These ten moves are not easy to defend against. Regardless of speed, strength or skill, I am inferior to him.”

Grabbing Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders and violently shaking him once, Xiao Yuetan fiercely painted: “Xiang Shaolong. Look at me. This is either make or break. If you persist in thinking that you will lose this duel, you can never return to Xianyang and see your wives and son. As long as you can walk down Qixia College Stargazing Pavilion three days later with your life intact, you can leave Lin Zi that very night, returning back to Qin for an ultimate showdown with Lu Buwei. Otherwise, all your previous efforts would have come to naught.”

His whole body breaking out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong was shocked into awakening. His sharp eyes teeming with energy, he stared back at Xiao Yuetan and swore in a deep voice: “I got it. Xiang Shaolong would not let Brother Xiao

down. I, Xiang Shaolong, will definitely return to Qin in one piece.”

Xiao Yuetan released his grip on him and concluded: “I will proceed to draft the letter in your room. Once you have signed it, I will personally deliver it to Cao Cuidao. After that, we can only pray for his gallantry.”

Xiang Shaolong made his way to the enormous garden of the rear courtyard. With the area swept clean of snow, Feng Fei and the others are conducting an outdoor rehearsal. Right now, Dong Shuzen is practicing the critical main song.

Now that he is better at assessing a woman’s artistic talents, he discovered that compared to Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen evokes a totally different aura.

Unlike Feng Fei sloppy and diva attitude, Dong Shuzen carries an exquisite and enchanting aura that reminds him of a poem or a work of art. Even when she is feeling upset or angry, she can still radiate an indescribable sensation of playfulness and passion. It is truly captivating.

As the courtesans are fully immersed in the performance, none of them noticed Xiang Shaolong stepping into the garden. Only Feng Fei approached his side and whispered: “Once Shuzen finish singing this song, Great General will then announce Feng Fei’s retirement and her subsequent marriage into the Xiang Family. Shuzen shall officially succeed Feng Fei and be responsible for the performance at Qixia College.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “What?”

Chuckling with a 'Pu Ci', Feng Fei jested: "What is your what about? Didn't you impersonate Shen Liang to seduce me?"

Xiang Shaolong realizes that she is just fooling around and changed the topic: "Did Han Jie look for you?"

Feng Fei shot him a look and replied in a slow and melancholic manner: "I was looking for you regarding this issue. He told me he went to see Zongsun Xuanhua because he wants to gather more information about Zongsun Long and my case. He even swore to Heaven & Earth that he would never let me down. I am so confused by his promises and I am at a loss now."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "As an outsider, it is impossible for me to intervene. However, Zongsun Long did swear that he no longer bears any malice towards you. He even guaranteed to safely escort you to wherever you wish to go."

Her petite frame shivered once, as Feng Fei demanded: "From your tone, you sounded as if Lord Longyang and Han Chuang are both unreliable and at the same time, hinting me to give up Han Jie. What is going on?"

By now, the song has reached its highest peak and the environment was packed with a joyful and celebratory atmosphere like an energetic and dazzling display of fireworks. With the striking of the bell, the entire performance came to a stop instantaneously. However, the images of the spectacle continue to linger in one's memory.

Leading her fellow courtesans, Dong Shuzen came to the front of Xiang Shaolong and Feng Fei, bowing and paying their respects in their shrill voice.

Xiang Shaolong intensely felt that the bearing of the whole Song & Dance Troupe has improved tremendously, with every member working with a high fighting spirit and full of hope that the future is bright and can only get brighter.

If he had left tonight without saying goodbye, it would severely impact their morale. Thus, he can feel his own heroic sensation arising and matching their high morale.

His phobia towards Cao Cuidao has been cast to the back of his brain.

When Dong Shuzen stood up again, her eyes are filled with hot tears and glowing with utmost gratitude that no words can describe.

At this juncture, a subordinate came to report that Yan General Xu Yizhe is here to seek an audience with him.

Sighing to himself, Xiang Shaolong knows that another set of troubles await.

Xu Yizhe came to visit him in ordinary clothes and without any followers. His entourage is completely different from Lord Longyang and the others.

It has been years since they last met and the wrinkles on his face have increased considerably, signaling a tormenting lifestyle.

After exchange pleasantries, both men sat down according to their status as host and guest. This famed General of Yan lamented: "Today we may be pouring our hearts out to each other but tomorrow we could be meeting in the battlefield. This is truly dreadful."

Xiang Shaolong can comprehend his emotions and enquired about Prince Dan's situation.

Xu Yizhe sighed: "With wolves and tigers as neighbours, who can enjoy a day of peace? Great General should be aware of Qi's ambitions towards our territory. This time round, we initially did not wish to send anyone over. However, Guo Kai kept egging Prince Dan, promising that if we can support Tian Jian and suppress Tian Dan, it will result in a different outcome. Thus, here I am. And I have discovered that regardless of whoever is in power, halting these ambitions is simply impossible."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. The people of Zhao and Yan are mired in gratitude and hatred themselves. In the same year when he took the time machine and travelled to this era, the Yan invading army has just been freshly defeated by Lian Po, who subsequently attacked all the way to the capital of Yan. At that time, Wei, Han, Qi and Chu joined hands in pressuring Zhao, forcing them to withdraw. Taking advantage of the situation, Qi invade Yan and this time round, Chu came in to attack Qi from the back, as the Three States are unable to cope with Qi due to the fierce threat from mighty Qin.

The entire history of the Warring States is a record of large States conquering the smaller States. Every State has its expansionary policy and increased its own strength by absorbing territory from other States. If they do not increase their own strength, they would be conquered by others to be used to increase the strength of others. For example, if Yan is a bigger state than Qi, the people of Qi would be the ones feeling depressed now.

Ever since their crushing defeat at the hands of Zhao, Yan has been struggling at the brink of extinction. If not for Prince Dan who sent Jingke to assassinate Xiao Pan in the later years, probably nobody would have a deep impression of Yan.

Xu Yizhe added: "Prince Dan is currently based at Wu Yang, it is a developed city beside River Wu and it is nearer to the South border in preparation for any threats from Qi. If Great General can spare the time, Prince Dan would love to meet his old buddy."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Now, I am not even confident if I can make it safely back to Xianyang alive and would not burden myself with other matters."

Xu Yizhe officially state: "Is Great General referring to the duel with Cao Cuidao? I am certain it is Tian Dan and Lu Buwei fanning the flames from behind. Great General must exercise caution when dealing with it. We did send a few top swordsmen to challenge Cao Cuidao, hoping to ruffle the

feathers of Qi. Unexpectedly, they could not even overcome Zongsun Xuanhua, causing us some distress.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that his present predicament is indirectly caused by Han Chuang. Not wishing to discuss any further, he changed the topic: “When is Brother Xu going back to Yan?”

Xu Yizhe answered: “I had planned to leave the next morning after the birthday banquet but right now, I would only leave after witnessing Great General triumph over Cao Cuidao.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Brother Xu is expecting too much from me.”

Xu Yizhe was slightly stunned and queried: “The match has not yet begun. Why is Great General already feeling disillusioned?”

Xiang Shaolong obviously could not tell him he had experienced Cao Cuidao’s prowess before and could only mutter some gibberish and changed the topic again.

After some idle chatter, Xu Yizhe finally brought up the topic that Xiang Shaolong feared most of all: “Besides paying my respects to Great General, Xu Yizhe has a special request.”

Xiang Shaolong could only respond: “Brother Xu, please speak without any reservations.”

Xu Yizhe solemnly explained: “Although we took part in the allied campaign and attacked your State, we did so reluctantly and were in fact forced by circumstances. Otherwise, we would be helpless and alone the next time Qi

attacks us. If we can get rid of this thorn in the flesh, I guarantee that my State will never participate in any allied campaigns.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “This is a high level decision. Can Brother Xu have the final say?”

Xu Yizhe sighed: “This is no longer regarding who has the final say but this is the dream of the key decision maker. Now that Tian Dan and Lu Buwei are in cahoots and the might of Qin military is suppressing the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), causing them to be unable to divert any resources to the north, giving Tian Dan the opportunity to occupy our territory. All I ask of is for Great General to hint Qi that Qin will not sit by and watch while Qi expand their borders. With that, even if Qi has all the guts in the world, they would not dare to be complacent. With just one sentence, Great General shall win the friendship of my State on behalf of your State.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong found himself in such a complicated dilemma. Although he could influence Xiao Pan, that is purely because he does not possess any selfish motives and is always thinking from Xiao Pan’s point of view.

Ever since Qin implemented Shang Yang’s reforms, they have a policy of befriending distant States while invading neighbouring States. For example, they maintained cordial relations with Qi and Chu while making inroads into the lands of the Three States. With regards to Yan, Yan did enjoy a glorious period when King Yan Zao constructed a Golden

Pavilion to recruit famed generals such as Le Yi who successfully repelled the Qi army. Presently, Qin cannot be bothered with pathetic Yan, which is situated in the desolated northeast. Therefore, Qin would never forsake their relationship with Qi for Yan.

From another angle, he has to make provisions for Shan Rou and assist Xie Ziyuan in regaining Tian Jian's cooperation. To a certain extent, he has to match the same promise Lu Buwei has committed to Tian Jian. The promise naturally involves Yan, this juicy piece of meat.

He knows better than anybody that he is not someone who is suitable for political work. Of course he could easily win the affections of Xu Yizhe by pretending to agree first and subsequently doing the opposite. However, this is something his conscience would never allow.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "It may appear easy for me to accept your proposition and just mention this one sentence; however, I am afraid it cannot be done."

His countenance slightly altered, Xu Yizhe admitted: "Then it must be my imperfect judgment, assuming that Great General is a true friend of Prince Dan."

Xiang Shaolong clarified: "Brother Xu is mistaken. Friends are friends. This fact would never change. The problem is that I am not officially visiting Qi on behalf of Qin and with Lu Buwei posing an obstruction, it would be challenging for me to put your message across. Therefore, I dare not recklessly agree. Can you give me some time to think this through?"

Sighing, he added: "If I succumbed under Cao Cuidao's sword, all my undertakings would be meaningless."

His expression turning warm, Xu Yizhe was slightly embarrassed: "It is me who had jumped to conclusions. We shall speak again after Great General return victoriously from Qixia College."

Xu Yizhe concluded his visit, standing up and bidding farewell. After sending him off at the Villa entrance, Li Yuan happened to come along.

In the past, Xiang Shaolong has the free time to take an afternoon nap. Presently, he is handling one appointment after another, working himself to death.

Firstly instructing Li Yuan to wait for him in the main hall, he proceeded to put his signature on the letter Xiao Yuetan had prepared. While he was rushing towards the main hall, Little Ping'er detained him, demanding: "Mistress is urgently looking for you and insists that you see her at once."

Witnessing the melancholic and pitiful glow of her eyes, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart grinding with agony. However, there is nothing he can do about it as he had made up his mind to refrain from taking another wife or concubine. Love is in fact the greatest burden of all. Since the passing of Princess Qian, the only women who have moved his heart are Qin Qing and Li Yanyan.

Xiang Shaolong was in a fix: "But Li Yuan is waiting for me in the main hall!"

Little Ping'er declared: "Nevertheless, you must visit Mistress first because Lady Qingxiu has sneaked into her bedroom."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong knows Lady Qingxiu and Feng Fei are acquainted. After weighing his options, he hurriedly made his way to meet this gorgeous lady.

As anticipated, Lady Qingxiu's face is covered with several layers of veil as she refuses to let Xiang Shaolong view her actual face. After Feng Fei knowingly excused herself, Lady Qingxiu went straight to the point: "Does Great General knows that you are in an extremely dangerous situation?"

Nodding, Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "What updates does Your Lady have for me?"

Lady Qingxiu enlightened: "Chancellor Li naturally would not talk to me about his affairs. However, I did send someone to keep an eye on him. For the past two days, Han Chuang visited him several times and held secret discussions. Great General yourself is an observant man and should be aware that Han Chuang's character is deplorable. All along, Chancellor Li does not have a high opinion of Han Chuang. When they are suddenly behaving so intimately, I sense something is afoot."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "I understand. Thanks so much Your Lady. I am extremely grateful."

Lady Qingxiu simply state: "I am doing this for Yanyan; otherwise she would certainly blame me. We are just ordinary women and in our eyes, Great General has done

Chancellor Li a huge favour and Chancellor Li would be at fault if he repays your favour with evil. We do not care about other details. I dare not hold Great General back from your official work anymore. Great General, please help yourself.”

Xiang Shaolong is used to her icy demeanor, seemingly putting an enormous chasm between her and everybody else. He paid his respects and bade farewell before heading to meet Li Yuan.

Sitting alone in the main hall, Li Yuan was sipping his tea in silence. Wearing a look of anguish, it may be due to the fact that he is betraying Xiang Shaolong, causing his mind to be turbulent.

Settling down by his side, Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger rising. He coldly hissed: “I shall have to trouble Brother Li to inform your best friend that I have decided not to leave tonight.”

Li Yuan shuddered forcefully: “Is Brother Xiang leaving tonight?”

Observing his body language, Xiang Shaolong deduced that he is not putting on an act. Mystified, he wondered: “Didn’t that ingrate Han Chuang tell you about it?”

Li Yuan swore to heaven that he was wronged: “I really do not know about this matter. I came to look for you today because I wanted to tell you that the fella Han Chuang has convinced Guo Kai to get rid of you and frame Lu Buwei for it, causing internal strife within Qin. Hey? Are you assuming that I am in the same league as him? If I really stoop so low,

can I, Li Yuan, be considered a human being? Yanyan will hate me for life.”

His thoughts jumbling up, Xiang Shaolong can no longer discern who is a friend or foe. He disputed: “Why didn’t you visit me over the past two days? If I had tried to leave tonight, wouldn’t I be falling into Han Chuang’s and Guo Kai’s trap?”

Li Yuan was guilt-ridden: “Han Chuang did approach me consistently over the past few days. I did intend to stay out their affairs but eventually, I could not answer to my conscience any more. Shaolong, please do not blame me. It is Little Brother who is lacking in willpower.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Did it ever cross your minds that as long as I am alive and confining Lu Buwei in a power tussle, it would be unlikely for Qin to attack your States with its full potential. I am certain all of you can imagine what would be the alternative if I am not around.”

He could not help but recall Xiao Pan’s identity crisis again. This event would cause both him and Xiao Pan to be at a severe disadvantage. Even if Lord Changping and the others continue to express their support for Xiao Pan, he would have lost the legal and moral right to rule.

Li Yuan bitterly smiled: “Essentially, Lord Longyang could not bear to betray Shaolong too. Due to a moment of carelessness, he did mention to Han Chuang he once saw you in Daliang. After the incident, he did not make a report to Wei. Thus, he was blackmailed by Han Chuang into

cooperating with him because this information could lead to the annihilation of his clan. His affections towards you is deeper than any one of us and he is naturally experiencing the most agony. Brother Xiang should understand what I meant.”

Xiang Shaolong was incensed: “This fella Han Chuang has gone overboard. On the surface, he is spouting all kinds of friendship and integrity quotes. No wonder he has a special fear of me; his conscience is overpowered by guilt. Aye, since he could feel pangs of guilt, that means his personality is not completely evil.”

Li Yuan bitterly smiled: “I cannot imagine that Brother Xiang is still in the mood to joke. Han Chuang is indeed exceedingly troubled. Part of the reason behind his actions is due to pressure from Guo Kai. The loophole is that someone from Han Chuang’s entourage is a spy of Guo Kai, causing this information to be leaked out. Currently, Han cannot afford to offend Zhao and Han Chuang himself is terrified of Han Jing. If she lodges a complaint against him to the King of Han, he would be in hot soup.”

His anger faintly subsiding, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “If I had knew about this earlier, I should have killed Guo Kai when I had the chance. It will save me from facing all these problems.”

Li Yuan reminded: “Even if it was somebody else, there would be no difference because in order to survive, men have been known to use all forms of despicable methods.

However, this is simply against my conscience. In my opinion, even without your intervention, Han Chuang would terminate his scheme to escort you out of Lin Zi tonight. Using Cao Cuidao's sword to get rid of you is surely better than getting his own hands dirty."

From this sentence, Xiang Shaolong is confident that Li Yuan did not participate in this scheme; otherwise, he would be aware that Lord Longyang was the one escorting him away. On the surface, Han Chuang is supposed to be ignorant about this arrangement.

His mood improving, Xiang Shaolong perceived: "In this case, I should be safe before my duel with Cao Cuidao."

Li Yuan sighed: "Logically, that is correct. However, I am concerned that the idle swordsmen of Lin Zi may be eager to challenge you and assess your swordsmanship beforehand."

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: "I am in a terrible mood right now; they had better not mess around with me."

Li Yuan wondered after some contemplation: "Cao Cuidao is truly a brilliant and exceptional swordsman. There has never been a swordsman as skillful as him. Does Shaolong have the confidence to defeat him?"

Recalling Xiao Yuetan's 'Ten Strokes' proposal, Xiang Shaolong immediately felt better and nodded: "I should have no difficulty in defending myself."

Li Yuan was amazed at his reply and did not probe further. Just as he was about to continue the conversation, Xie

Ziyuan came looking for Xiang Shaolong. Knowing that it is inconvenient for him to stick around, Li Yuan swiftly left.

As Xiang Shaolong welcomed Xie Ziyuan into the hall, the latter bitterly laughed: "The appointment is fixed. However, Little Brother is facing a new setback. My wifey does not believe that we are going out together tonight and must witness your presence before she will give her approval."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Shan Rou is only making up an excuse to see him. He bitterly smiled: "This time round, I shall fetch Brother Xie at your residence."

Xie Ziyuan was elated: "Brother Xiang is a true friend indeed. When Second Prince knows that he is finally meeting you, he was overwhelmed with happiness. He states that in front of Yingzheng, a word from you is way more effective than ten words from Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt that the eventual demise of Qi is precisely due to this kind of mindset.

Xie Ziyuan fantasized: "Once again, we must get Soft Boned Beauty to accompany us tonight. It is an incredible sensation to feel her leaning onto my body."

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed: "Isn't she working for Tian Dan? It would be inappropriate for her to overhear our conversation!"

Xie Ziyuan assured: "You can put your mind at ease. She is famous for not meddling in political affairs. Moreover, our

discussion is not fully confidential. We mainly need to make it clear to the Second Prince that you are on our side.”

Recalling the incident this morning when the King of Qi scolded the First Prince Tian Sheng without mincing his words, he could comprehend why everybody is having a better opinion of Tian Jian and his higher chances at the throne.

Suppressing his voice, Xie Ziyuan clandestinely revealed: “It is rumoured that the Great King will announce the Crown Prince succeeding his throne during the birthday banquet. It will unquestionably be Second Prince. As a result, we need to borrow Brother Xiang to ruffle the feathers of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei.”

In his wildest dream, Xiang Shaolong could not imagine pitting himself against Lu Buwei and Tian Dan in this political struggle. It clearly demonstrates that political battles can kill without shedding blood.

From being an ‘insignificant’ being, he is now a Qin political heavyweight and can even influence the political outcome of other States. Life is truly beyond anticipation.

After informing him the appointed time, Xie Ziyuan speedily left to update Zongsun Long father and son.

Retrieving the Hundred Battle Sabre which he had securely hidden in his room, Xiang Shaolong hung it around his waist. In his mind, he decided that in the event that Cao Cuidao refuses to accept the ten-stroke proposal, he would immediately flee with Feng Fei once the festivities of the

birthday banquet have been completed. Staying alive is of utmost importance. The swordsman's glory is only secondary.

Reminiscing Cao Cuidao's amazing swordplay, all his fighting spirit drummed up earlier by Xiao Yuetan disappeared without a trace.

But if Old Cao is willing to accept the ten-stroke limit, he does not mind giving it a go. No matter how inferior he is, he can surely defend against ten moves.

He obviously understood that Xiao Yuetan is thinking from his point of view. Fleeing from a duel will leave a huge blemish on his celebrated life as a warrior. It is considered an unwise move, especially during this period when Xiao Pan is undergoing an identity calamity.

Nevertheless, no one understands him better than himself. Cao Cuidao's sword cannot be defended with pure strength alone. Dying in such a manner is not worthwhile, causing him to think of ways to avoid the fight. In addition, he cannot afford to leave his wives and child behind.

Until now, he is still unsure if Lord Longyang has betrayed him or not. The truth will come to light depending on whether he will cancel the arrangement to leave Lin Zi tonight or not.

He felt inclined to practice his sabre moves in the garden but on hindsight, if Old Cao is unwilling to accept the ten-strokes suggestion, all his practice would be meaningless. Absorbed in his thoughts, a fragrant smelling Xinyue suddenly

squeezed herself into his arms and embraced him tightly. She faintly panted: "Great General has thoroughly deceived us!"

Hugging her enticing, curvaceous body and facing her attractive features, Xiang Shaolong is speedily losing his self control. However, he does not wish to hurt her feelings and could only quiz: "Doesn't Miss Xinyue need to participate in the rehearsal?"

Xiang Shaolong is asking this question because he can occasionally hear traces of music coming from the garden.

Her eyes shining and gazing at him, Xinyue cajoled: "First Mistress is currently tutoring Second Mistress in her singing methods and hand gestures. I was pining for Great General and took this opportunity to slip away and look for you!"

A beauty is always hard to resist and moreover, Xiang Shaolong does not bear any ill feelings towards this particular courtesan. Unable to harden his heart and reject her outright, he could only distract her by questioning: "Will you continue to pursue your art and assist Second Mistress?"

Xinyue articulated: "Of course I will. As touring courtesans, we have an unspoken tradition: Never marry into a rich family. If we must marry, we would rather marry into a common family or stay single for life. Aye, we have seen all kinds of men while plying our trade. We no longer believe in true love."

Initially shocked, Xiang Shaolong was comforted and sighed with relief: “Nonetheless, courtesans like you who are able to decide your own life journey is limited in numbers. The courtesans who are employed by the rich have no say in their future.”

Kissing his lips, Xinyue coquettishly smiled: “When I was still misled that you are Shen Liang and knowing that the Song & Dance Troupe is disbanding in the near future, it did cross my mind to marry you. But right now, I can only do my best and serve Great General. Shall I come to your room tonight? You are much more dashing than before.”

Xiang Shaolong is greatly tempted but felt that he would be letting Ji Yanran and the others down. Thus, he politely rejected: “At this point in time, I have to preserve my strength in order to face that old fella Cao Cuidao in a showdown. If I managed to survive, I would approach you even if you did not approach me.”

Xinyue was thrilled: “It’s a deal!” Serving up another fragrant kiss, she was highly alluring.

After her departure, Xiang Shaolong took a glance at the sky. Instead of moping and wasting his energy on mindless thoughts, he might as well stroll along the streets and enjoy the sights, eventually walking to Xie Residence to see Shan Rou and Xie Ziyuan.

Making up his mind, he changed into a warrior uniform and wore a long sleeved cotton windbreaker on the outside.

Completing his attire with a cap, he slipped out to the streets.

The weather is fantastic and the sun is about to set behind the western mountains. The streets are exceptionally lively and packed with pedestrians and carriages.

Now that his sword injury is almost healed and with Hundred Battle Sabre by his side, he could survive any encounter unless he happened to be surrounded by a huge body of warriors. However, no one would dare to openly make a move on him. If a single challenger approaches, it would be an excellent opportunity for him to practice his sabre moves.

Initially, he was on full alert mode but after utilizing various methods to test for stalkers, he concluded that no one is trailing him. Finally letting his hair down, he turned his focus towards the sights and sounds of this ancient capital as he leisurely strolled along.

The open-mindedness of the Qi lady is ranked third after Qin and Zhao.

Inheriting the uncivilized behavior of barbaric ancestors, the womenfolk of Qin are largely gypsies by nature. Due to a lack of men in Zhao, the royal family is encouraging the population to procreate. As a result, the ladies of the two States Qin and Zhao are unafraid of men. Bubbly and full of passion, they have been known to flirt unabashedly with strangers they met on the road.

On the other hand, the typical Qi lady is born with inherent passion. It is not known if such a nature is consistent with people who are born in a State next to the sea. They seldom exhibit signs of bashfulness.

Walking alone on the streets, Xiang Shaolong would occasionally encounter groups of Qi ladies who would bat their eyelashes continuously at him or gaze at him meaningfully, resulting in a romantic and amorous ambience.

Of all the places he has visited, the ladies of Chu are the most conservative. The extreme ones would be someone like Lady Qingxiu who would not even expose her true face to men. In addition, from her bearing and speech, one can sense her aloofness and inapproachability.

He could not help but think about Lady Zhuang. She originates from a southern minority race and is much more direct in her advances.

With light-hearted steps, he stepped into Xie Residence. Without the need to relay his arrival, the servant brought him straight to Shan Rou's residing courtyard.

Dragging him to the side hall, Shan Rou loudly wailed: "How can you accept Master's challenge? Have you already forgotten that he stabbed you a few days ago?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "He is now the provocateur; Little Brother is just the innocent victim."

Furiously stomping her feet, Shan Rou cursed: “You fool! You think I, Shan Rou, is unaware of your, Xiang Shaolong’s, skill level? This is as good as committing suicide. Go ahead and lose. It’s no big deal anyway.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “I am now representing the glory of Qin’s swordsmen. I am not committing suicide as not all duels have to end with the death of the loser right?”

Shan Rou was hopping mad: “You do not understand Master. With a sword in his hand, he becomes void of emotions and no one can influence him. His past opponents were either killed or seriously injured. You have no idea how lucky you are to be able to escape with a minor sword wound the last time round.”

She added: “Earlier, I visited Master and pleaded with him to retract the challenge. However, he mentioned that it is rare for him to encounter a worthy adversary like you and refuses to change his mind. It is truly maddening.”

Xiang Shaolong could not bear to see her in a worried state of mind. He first made her promise to keep it an absolute secret before telling her about Xiao Yuetan’s ten-stroke proposal.

After learning about this, Shan Rou exhaled with a cold breath: “Master has always overpowered his enemies within a few strokes. Do you think these ten strokes are easy to defend?”

Patting his baby around his waist, Xiang Shaolong proudly assured: “If I had failed to withstand ten strokes from him, I

would not be alive and standing here at the receiving end of your anger.”

Noticing his Hundred Battle Sabre, Shan Rou’s pretty eyes started to glow and she vulgarly grabbed it from him and began to toy with it. She gleefully exclaimed: “It has been a long time since I exchanged moves with an expert. Let’s see how you fare.”

Xiang Shaolong obviously recognizes her prowess and hurriedly countered: “It is not a good time to fight now. Please grant Little Brother one more night of rest. When I have fully recovered from my injury, I shall then pit my skills against yours.”

Shan Rou viciously declared: “I shall look for you tomorrow. If you are still making lame excuses, I shall give you a trashing.”

Finishing with a ‘Pu Ci’, she broke out in a string of giggles and is as mesmerizing as ever.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Shan Rou is one of the ladies he would sincerely love to retain by his side. However, she is now the wife of another man, resulting in another one of life’s helpless regrets.

Compared to Chu Empress Li Yanyan, he already foresee that it would be a simple one night stand and was mentally prepared. Thus, he was not the least bit upset.

He even retains wonderful memories of their rendezvous.

Leaning slightly closer to Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou solemnly described: "If you can cause Old Thief Tian (Dan) to lose power, it would make him much more miserable than just killing him. It is as good as avenging my family. That is why I have never permitted Ziyuan that scoundrel to work hand in hand with him. It is amusing how Zongsun Xuanhua develop the mistaken impression that I have a favourable opinion of him and his father."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I got it. Despite all obstacles, I will accomplish this mission for the sake of Sister Rou."

Laughing like a blossoming flower, Shan Rou guffawed: "All along, I knew you are a good man!"

At this juncture, Xie Ziyuan returned to the residence and had a change of clothes. Sending them off at the gate, Shan Rou reminded Xiang Shaolong that she would look for him tomorrow for a sparring match.

As the carriage drove out of Xie Residence, Xie Ziyuan warned: "Within Lin Zi, almost every swordsman has suffered at the hands of my wife. Even Zongsun Xuanhua is afraid of accepting her challenges. Brother Xiang had better be careful."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "If I cannot even overcome her, I can forget about dueling with Senior Cao Cuidao."

Thinking back, Xie Ziyuan thought so too and laughed at himself for being muddle-headed.

Listening to the light hoof beats, Xiang Shaolong closed his eyes and was instantly teleported to his warm and inviting home in Xianyang.

VOLUME 24

CHAPTER 1

The Victorious Hundred Battle Sabre

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

WHEN they reached Jade Orchid Brothel, Zongsun Long father and son are already respectfully awaiting and

brimming with brotherly affections. Compared to their initial encounter, it was a world of difference.

This time round, the banquet lounge and the setting is far better than before as Zongsun Long had reserved the most luxurious courtyard Jade Orchid Brothel can offer. It naturally included the companionship of their eight top courtesans, which Lan Gongyuan is obviously part of. Even Madam Orchid had been specially engaged to oversee their gathering.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong who has resumed his original appearance, Lan Gongyuan personally welcomed him. Hooking his arm and leading him to his seat, she leaned towards his ear and whispered: "The last time round, I knew I had hit my mark. Why are you still alive and kicking?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it was brilliant of her to use a casual remark to resolve their enmity into a round of flirting between a man and a woman. He smiled: "Why is Miss Yuan acting on the orders of Tian Dan? Is it because of Qi Yu?"

Lan Gongyuan plainly state: "As a citizen of Qi, Yuan Yuan must contribute my part to Great Qi. On a personal basis, I am full of admiration for Great General."

Right now, Zongsun Xuanhua who was seated at the second table burst out laughing: "Tonight, Yuan Yuan is experiencing a change of heart and is only concerned with whispering sweet nothings to Great General. Do you think you deserved to be punished with a cup of wine?"

After lightly pecking Xiang Shaolong on the cheek, Lan Gongyuan's pretty eyes glanced sideways at Xie Ziyuan who is behaving intimately with another gorgeous courtesan. She laughed in reply like a blossoming flower: "The one who is experiencing a change of heart is somebody else. The person who should be punished is Official Xie instead of me."

Raising his wine cup and chuckling, Xie Ziyuan suggested: "Yes, yes, I deserved to be punished but Yuan Yuan cannot be spared too. However, she can sing instead of drink. Ha!"

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused. Once he stepped into a brothel, Xie Ziyuan seems to be HIGH despite not taking any intoxicants and is behaving like a completely different person. Nonetheless, witnessing that he is not aroused by even a super beauty like Lan Gongyuan, Xiang Shaolong can deduce that he is just a playacting, harmless visitor and would never be addicted to lust, alcohol or other vice activities.

With reference to the three Famous Courtesans, he does not have an inkling of fantasy towards Lan Gongyuan. The reason is probably his constant deep fear of suffering at her cruel hands. After all, her entire gang of troupe members and fellow conspirators has lost their lives in Xianyang because of him. It would be surprising if she does not bear any hatred towards him.

While he was immensely tempted by Feng Fei, he can feel his attraction for her dwindling after discovering her numerous lies and attempted murder.

On the other hand, the unique and aloof beauty Shi Sufang has piqued his interest and curiosity.

Among the shrill laughter and cheers, everyone raised their cups and toasted one another.

Zongsun Long was seated opposite Xiang Shaolong and was surrounded by a bevy of beauties. After raising his cup and toasting Xiang Shaolong, he wondered: "Why is Second Prince late?"

As expected, no one could answer him. Xie Ziyuan recommended: "Why don't we send someone to rush him?"

Zongsun Xuanhua immediately commanded a subordinate to handle this task. He then turned towards Xiang Shaolong: "I heard from Official Xie that Junior Martial Sister Rou will be sparring with Great General tomorrow. If Great General does not mind, can Xuanhua tag along and witness Great General's amazing skills?"

Secretly annoyed at Xie Ziyuan's big mouth, Xiang Shaolong has no grounds to object and could only reply: "My skills are mediocre and not befitting Brother Xuanhua's proficiency."

Zongsun Long merrily guffawed: "Great General is too modest!"

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is aware that Zongsun Xuanhua has 'invited himself' to personally assess his prowess and calculate the probability of him surviving his Master's sword. If Xiang Shaolong is proven incapable, they (Zongsun family)

would have to make other plans because if Xiang Shaolong is slain, all their grand plans would evaporate into thin air.

Leaning towards his ear again, Lan Gongyuan quizzed: “Has Great General met Grandmaster Cao before?”

Xiang Shaolong will not be truthful to her and shook his head. When he was about to say something, three men strode into their lounge in huge steps. One of them was astonishingly Lan Gongyuan’s lover Qi Yu. The other two men are about the same age and were dressed in a warrior uniform and a scholar robes accordingly.

The warrior has a tall and burly frame that radiates with ferocity. With thick shoulders and neck, his face is pockmarked and his eyes are protruding. Coupled with a nose like a lion’s, he can be classified as an ugly man. Despite all that, he exudes an intense masculine aura.

The man dressed as a scholar is skinny and tall, with eyes that betray his intelligence. He somewhat resembles Tian Dan, allowing Xiang Shaolong to easily conclude that he is Tian Dan’s son Tian Bang, causing him a certain amount of shock.

This does not seem like an appropriate place for him to show up.

Zongsun Long and the others fell into a daze, not knowing how to react.

The courtesans are already kneeling down and paying their respects.

Tian Bang took the lead and cupped his hands together as a sign of respect. To Xiang Shaolong, he grinned: "After learning that Great General is here, Tian Bang specially came to have a look for myself. I hope Great General would not hold it against me for barging in."

Xiang Shaolong stood up and returned his greetings. As he shifted his gaze to Qi Yu, the fella's eyes flashed with a penetrating hatred. The corner of his mouth curling up to shape a cold smile, Qi Yu sniggered: "Seeing Brother Xiang after so many years, I hope you are doing well. I heard Lady (Zhao) Ya died in the foreign territory of Xianyang. This is truly lamentable."

(For some Chinese, it is considered inauspicious or bad to die in a 'foreign' place. Example: overseas, on the roads or even hospital. Many prefer to die at home. Somewhat linked to their ego that they have a home to die in and not die in the wilderness. Therefore, family members usually arrange for their bodies to be sent home before burial or cremation. For Zhao Ya, a Zhao royalty to die in Qin, can be interpreted that she is a jinx.)

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that he intentionally brought up Lady Ya, reminding him the agony of having a loved one snatched away by another man. For a brief moment, his heart was pricking with pain. Xiang Shaolong forcefully smiled and did not answer him.

The warrior's attitude is even more conceited than the other two. Cupping his fists, he bellowed: "I am Ma Chenjia and I

have always desired to witness a display of Great General's swordsmanship. I wonder if I can have a taste of your brilliant skills before Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao?"

Zongsun Long father and son as well as Xie Ziyuan were instantly agitated. For Ma Chenjia to openly challenge Xiang Shaolong in this manner and demanding it to take place before Cao Cuidao's appointment, not only did he fail to account for their presence, he is also hinting that Xiang Shaolong would certainly perish at the hands of Cao Cuidao. Nevertheless, given the present circumstances, it is difficult for them to intervene.

Zongsun Xuanhua himself is not a noble gentleman too. He secretly swore that once Xiang Shaolong rejected the challenge, he would stand up at once and issue his own challenge to Ma Chenjia, going all out to take his life. Zongsun Long, on the other hand, has made up his mind that even with Tian Dan sheltering Ma Chenjia, he would still get his henchmen to break both his legs.

Within the courtyard, the tension in the air is electrifying.

While living in the 21st Century, Xiang Shaolong is already a troublemaker in his own right and has the habit of getting himself into bar fights. Now that he has 'matured', his temper has mellowed and no longer finds any meaning in these pointless scuffles. That is why he refrains from fighting and it is absolutely not because of fear.

Now that Tian Bang, Qi Yu and famed Qi swordsman Ma Chenjia are gatecrashing their party with a bullying attitude, Xiang Shaolong can feel his blood boiling but at the same time, he is doing his best to calm down. He simply smiled: "Since Brother Ma is so keen, I can easily exchange some pointers with you. However, it is not a good time now, why don't ..."

Qi Yu abruptly interrupted: "If Brother Xiang is expecting Second Prince, you can save your energy. Imperial Uncle and Official Han (Jie) just started a meeting with him. I doubt Second Prince can make the time to come over."

Zongsun Long and everyone else were greatly traumatized. Isn't this a clear sign that Tian Jian has decided to throw in his lot with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan? Only Xiang Shaolong is able to decipher the true picture, acknowledging that Tian Jian is concerned that he would succumb to the sword of Cao Cuidao, causing him to place his bet on the wrong man. Consequently, he is temporarily evaluating the situation further and hence, chose to avoid this meeting. Presently, Lu Buwei and Han Jie must be using all their powers of eloquence to destabilize Tian Jian's trust in his current allies.

Ma Chenjia chortled: "Since this is the case, why don't Great General draw your sword now and let me have a taste of your prowess!"

Earlier, Xiang Shaolong has accumulated plenty of frustration due to the betrayals of Han Chuang, Lord Longyang, etc. Now that he is faced with Tian Jian's indecisiveness,

resembling grass on a wall that bends in whichever direction the wind blows, coupled with this frog in a well Ma Chenjia who is purposely stirring trouble, he is ready to erupt. He forcefully discarded his coat, revealing his sturdy built that is unquestionably more muscular than Ma Chenjia and snarled: "Since you are so persistent, let's do it!"

Among the crowd, no one anticipated his courageous demeanor and instant reaction to Ma Chenjia's provocation. They were stunned on the spot.

Observing his newly exposed wide shoulders, broad chest, slender waist and long legs forming an incredible physique, coupled with his awe inspiring and indomitable bearing, all the ladies were intoxicated and Lan Gongyuan is of no exception.

Xiang Shaolong is now gripping the handle of Hundred Battle Sabre as he took giant strides towards the centre of the lounge, cumulating into a terrifying and dominating pressure.

Tian Bang and Qi Yu were rattled and they clumsily retreated to the back, inadvertently enhancing Xiang Shaolong's daunting posture as if it was an aggressive dragon coming out of its cave.

Ma Chenjia did not expect him to make his move without the slightest indication. Stuck in the line of fire, he can sense the incoming threat Xiang Shaolong posing.

In this context, it is preposterous for Ma Chenjia to request Xiang Shaolong to back off and give him a break. Coldly grunting once, he took a step back to avoid the advancing menace.

With his rich battle experience, Xiang Shaolong knows that he has gained the first mover advantage and obviously would not let Ma Chenjia regain his footing. Noting Ma Chenjia stepping backwards, he faced the sky and laughed loudly. Concurrently, with a JIANG! sound, he pulled out Hundred Battle Sabre and continued pressing forward.

The moment the sabre left its scabbard, the entire hall became clogged with a chilling sensation, causing everyone present to be petrified.

Only now did Ma Chenjia remember that his opponent is not using a sword but a weapon which he is unfamiliar with. In his heart, he became even more fearful and had to take another two steps back to give himself the opportunity to assess Xiang Shaolong's attacking style.

Xiang Shaolong obviously would not miss this opening. Swiftly proceeding with steady footwork, he raised Hundred Battle Sabre above his head and simultaneously held the sabre with his left hand as well. He ferociously roared: "Draw your sword!"

In the same instance, Ma Chenjia felt as if he is being overwhelmed by a surge of attacking power and hastily drew his sword.

Xiang Shaolong darted towards his goal and by now, Hundred Battle Sabre has crossed its tipping point and is now a cold sabre flash chopping down on the tangled and disconcerted Ma Chenjia like a bolt of lightning.

If he is a smart man, Ma Chenjia should realize that the best way to resolve this predicament is to continue retreating or even retreat out of the room and reengaged the fight on the open grounds of the courtyard.

Unfortunately, he happens to be the aggressor and was passing condescending remarks earlier. Under the gaze of the crowd, he could not retreat like a cowardly turtle as this is only the first move. Gnashing his teeth, he raised his sword horizontally to ward off the strike.

Conscious that his opponent is defending in a state of panic and is only using one hand to hold his sword, Xiang Shaolong was secretly delighted and chopped down with his full strength

JIANG!

Ma Chenjia's long sword has been severed by the sabre. Amidst the sounds of screaming, Xiang Shaolong has retreated and his sabre has reentered the scabbard.

Ma Chenjia's expression is worse than that of a corpse. Still holding his broken sword, he stood in a daze at the same spot. A new blood scar is now running from his front hairline to between his eyebrows. As fresh blood began streaming down his face, it was a horrifying sight.

Everyone knew that Xiang Shaolong had shown mercy. However, it is even more shocking to witness his precision and mastery of the sabre.

Who could have guessed that one sabre strike is all it takes to deliver a crushing defeat to one of Lin Zi's famed swordsman Ma Chenjia? Even Cao Cuidao himself may not necessarily be able to accomplish such a feat.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked his lucky stars. If he had been equipped with Bloodwave, it would have exhausted much more energy to resolve this issue.

For a short spell, the whole lounge is completely silent.

Ma Chenjia suddenly shouted incoherently and discarded his broken sword. Embarrassed beyond redemption, he wildly tore out of the room.

Zongsun Xuanhua stood up and raised his wine cup, sighing: "No wonder Great General's fame has penetrated every corner of Xianyang. Even my Master is stirred into issuing a challenge to you. Such superb sabre skills are rare indeed."

With horror written all over their faces, Tian Bang and Qi Yu were still staring at Xiang Shaolong with disbelief. Speechless, they were awkwardly standing there, not knowing whether to stay or leave.

Scanning the crowd, Xiang Shaolong could tell that everyone is still reverberating in the earlier scene and that due to a nice coincidence, he had managed to showcase his prowess.

Smiling broadly, he concluded: "Since Second Prince is not coming, why don't we return home and have a early night!"

Barely stepping over the door ledge, Xiang Shaolong was summoned by Feng Fei.

At the upper loft sitting room of the main block, the stunning beauty was facing her zither and staring into space. Noticing his return, she then broke out of her stupor and pulled him to a corner before sitting down together. Feng Fei wondered in a slow and sad tone: "Han Jie came looking for me and sweet-talked me for a long time. However, my heart is already dead and I wasn't moved at all. This is so strange. In the past, whenever I think of him, there would be this sweet fondness in my heart. Now, I only regard him as an empty shell with a handsome outlook. Why is there such a huge disparity in my attitude?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and is concerned that Feng Fei may have shifted her affections towards himself. He tested: "Mistress, what are your plans for the future?"

Her eyes shimmering with a pitiful glow, Feng Fei's tone was remarkably calm. She gently professed: "For the time being, I only wish to live a peaceful and tranquil life. Can Great General please see to this arrangement?"

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a big burden has been lifted off his shoulders and heaved with relief: "After I settle Cao Cuidao, I would immediately escort you back to Xianyang. With my protection over there, there is nothing you need to fear."

Feng Fei was taken aback: "I know you are an accomplished swordsman but in the eyes of Qi, Cao Cuidao is no longer considered human and is worshipped like a deity. Why are you still as confident as ever? Cao Cuidao's sword is famed for being merciless. If anything were to happen to you, how do you expect me... how... Aye! Feng Fei does not wish to live too!"

Xiang Shaolong did not misinterpret her meaning, acknowledging that she does not wish to live because she would be helpless after losing him, her pillar of support and is thus having suicidal thoughts.

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not disclose to any Tom, Dick or Harry about his ten-strokes proposal. He simply smiled: "Cao Cuidao is merely an ordinary man whose sword skills happened to be better than his challengers! I am not trying to prove anything to anyone too. If I do not have confidence in preserving my life, I would have fled with you tonight!"

Half believing him, Feng Fei doubted: "You mustn't be overconfident. Although the people of Qi often exaggerate their words, it is still an undeniable fact that Cao Cuidao's swordsmanship has dominated the Six Eastern and Southern States."

Her gaze trailing to his Hundred Battle Sabre, Feng Fei lightly revealed: "Han Jie is afraid that I would shift my affections to you and heavily criticized you, causing me to despise him even more."

Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this behavior from Han Jie and is unaffected by this revelation. He chuckled: "Who can be loved by every person in the world? Let them jeer or criticize as much as they like. Yi! Mistress seems to be very interested in my sabre."

Reacting to his teasing, Feng Fei broke out into a smile, lifting her face and kissing him on the cheek. She whined: "The people interested in your baby are Cao Cuidao and the other swordsmen of Qi. I am only interested in you as an individual. What is the fun in fighting and killing? Nevertheless, you men are the ones who indulged incessantly in it and even got us, the vulnerable women, involved. Before Han Jie left, he mentioned that you might not even survive to see Cao Cuidao but Feng Fei is not intimidated by him."

Xiang Shaolong grinned: "Do you know who is Ma Chenjia?"

With a voice full of disdain, Feng Fei remarked: "Not only do I know who he is, I have even met him in person at Tian Dan's Chancellor Residence. In terms of swordsmanship, with the exception of Zongsun Xuanhua and Dan Chu, he and Min Tingzhang are considered the best."

She then frowned: "Why did you bring him up? This man is extremely annoying and his attitude is overbearing, giving me the impression that he behaves with disrespect. Additionally, he imagined himself to be very popular with ladies but personally, I feel disgusted whenever I see him."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I did not know that your love or hatred for men can be so extreme. However, I am sorry to say that you would be unable to see this person in the near future. Earlier, he approached me for a duel and using one strike, I left an inerasable mark on his face."

Feng Fei was thunderstruck: "Just one strike?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Little Brother has exaggerated a little. I did take a few steps too."

Collapsing into his bosom, Feng Fei shrilly laughed: "I cannot stand your self-gratified and irritating demeanor. But you simply chose not to fall for me."

Xiang Shaolong honestly declared: "I did fall for you. Aye! Who can resist falling in love with you? It is just that the burden of love is too much for me to bear. I already have three virtuous wives waiting for me at home and dare not get involved in new relationships."

Feng Fei replied in a unhurried and melancholic fashion: "I already knew and understood where you are coming from. I am sure the passing of Lady Ya and Princess Qian dealt you a severe blow, right?"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "How did you know about it?"

Feng Fei answered: "Of course somebody told me about it."

In his vast mind, the lovely silhouette of Lady Qingxiu began to materialize. Was she the one who told Feng Fei his past? If this is so, this beauty's heart is definitely in contrast to her

external cold countenance whenever she faces Xiang Shaolong.

Stretching out her lovely hand and stroking his cheek, Feng Fei affectionately suggested: "Great General must be tired. Why don't you spend the night in Feng Fei's room!"

Xiang Shaolong was about to reply her when footsteps sounded on the stairs, startling the two of them who quickly separated from each other.

Little Ping'er voice resounded from the stairs: "Lord Longyang is here to look for Great General."

Recollecting his appointment with Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong icily sniggered to himself, wondering what excuse this old friend would cook up in order to terminate tonight's escape plan.

After Feng Fei uttered a reply on his behalf, she faintly pleaded: "No matter how late you return tonight, please remember to drop by my place. Feng Fei is not asking for any status or responsibility but only wishes for a night of passion!"

CHAPTER 2

Full Confidence Recovery

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIANG SHAOLONG squirreled into the carriage compartment and the carriage began driving.

Lord Longyang could not hold back his emotions and leaned half of his 'petite frame' closer to Xiang Shaolong. With his 'pretty eyes' glowing, he cheered: "Using the excuse that I wanted to admire River Zi night scenery, I have laid my hands on a City Pass that allows me to leave the city. The minute we board the ship and raised the sails, cruising to the west, I guarantee we would be untouchable."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and frowned: "I heard the river route is still blockaded by ice and snow, can we still operate the ship?"

Lord Longyang assured: "I have already sent someone to check on this. Although the roads are still unfit for travelling, since yesterday the river has thawed and boats have begun arriving at Lin Zi from the east. Shaolong can put your mind at ease."

Hearing his description, Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Is Xiao Yuetan lying to him?

Logically speaking, if Lord Longyang and Han Chuang have joined hands to get rid of him, they should have aborted all their schemes and plans upon learning that Cao Cuidao has issued a challenge to him. Even if Xiang Shaolong had survived Cao Cuidao's sword, it is not too late assassinate him.

But upon witnessing Lord Longyang's serious demeanor, it is as if he is indeed doing his best to help Xiang Shaolong flee away from Lin Zi. Moreover, the passion radiating from him is something that cannot be falsified. What in the world is going on?

With his friends, Xiang Shaolong is generally straightforward. He could not bear it any longer and questioned: "Isn't Your Lordship concerned about Han Chuang's blackmail?"

His 'tender physique' trembling violently and his face turning ashen white, Lord Longyang stammered: "How did Shaolong know about this?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly indicated: "So it is true."

After a short spell of silence, Lord Longyang sighed: "Marquis Chuang is forced by circumstances as one of his men leaked this piece of information to that traitor Guo Kai. However, now that Shaolong has declared your real identity, Guo Kai instantly degenerated into a state of panic and is at a loss, not knowing whether to proceed or not."

Scrutinizing Lord Longyang's body language, Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Does Han Chuang knows about our plan to slip away tonight?"

Lord Longyang answered: "Of course he has no idea about it. I have sacrificed everything and would never allow Shaolong to perish in the hands of Cao Cuidao. I have witnessed one of this old fella's fights and his sword skills are truly earth shattering and mind blowing."

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but put his arm around his 'fragrant shoulders, sighing: "Knowing that Your Lordship did not betray me, Little Brother is brimming with joy and my exhilaration cannot be expressed in words. However, I cannot implicate Your Lordship. Please tell the carriage driver to turn back."

Lord Longyang shuddered once and cautioned: "Shaolong need not put up a strong front. According to my sources, Han Chuang and company did met up with Cao Cuidao in secret and advised him to kill you at all costs; otherwise, Qi will never enjoy days of peace. Thus, you must not assume that Cao Cuidao will show any mercy to you."

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: "I heard even the King of Qi is unable to influence Cao Cuidao. Who does that Han Chuang think he is?"

Momentarily stunned, Lord Longyang movingly declared: "I know Shaolong is worried about me but I have my own methods when dealing with Han Chuang. At the end of the day, he has many issues that requires my collaboration and would not dare to act recklessly."

He sighed with another breath: "I am not speaking up for him but he is in a difficult position as well. His friendship towards Shaolong is genuine."

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is not interested in fleeing anymore. He decided: "If I have to leave, I will leave after my bout with Cao Cuidao. In fact, I did exchange blows with him before and this precious Hundred Battle Sabre is what I robbed from him during that same encounter. Otherwise, how would I come to know that Han Chuang that fella has betrayed me."

Lord Longyang was incredulous: "You exchanged blows with him before?"

Xiang Shaolong gently persuaded: "Why don't Your Lordship order the carriage to turn back first? I shall furnish Your Lordship with the details after that!"

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, the sky is barely lighted.

Due to the frosty weather and him sleeping late last night, he does not feel like leaving his warm and comfortable bed and blankets.

Last night, he hardened his resolve and did not go over to Feng Fei's room because he does not want to lose perspective of the situation by getting involved in another relationship. His grand plan is to endure the ten strokes from Cao Cuidao and get Xie Ziyuan to arrange for him to slip out of Lin Zi. With regards to Feng Fei, he can rely on Zongsun Long father and son to safely escort her away. Based on his standing and that this is not Lu Buwei's territory, the other courtesans should not be in any danger.

Back in Xianyang, he would refuse to lead an army to participate in any battles. His only fantasy now is that Xiao Pan's identity crisis is not as bad as what he imagines. However, he acknowledges that this is merely his own positive wishful thinking.

Based on Lu Buwei's intelligence and such an obvious loophole, he cannot always rely on luck.

Out of the blue, the sound of noisy quarrelling can be heard from the front courtyard. Shortly, a man's painful scream resounded. Just as Xiang Shaolong was hugging his blanket and sitting up on his bed with shock, Shan Rou broke into his room and darted to his front. Slamming his chest and grabbing the front of his shirt, she vociferously scolded: "You lazy bum. Get out of bed at once. To think that you are still

idling in bed despite knowing that you are facing Master three days later.”

Hammered by Shan Rou until their faces are bruised and lips are swollen, Fei Chun, Lei Yun'er and other family warriors stumbled into his room in an extremely pathetic manner. Witnessing the magnificent Great General of Qin Xiang Shaolong wearing a helpless expression on his face while letting this shrew grab the front of his shirt, they were flabbergasted and froze on the spot, not knowing how to react.

With a bitter smile, Xiang Shaolong introduced: “This is Madam Xie whom even Cao Cuidao has troubling managing. The next time you see her, gentlemen should know what to expect.”

Rooted to the ground with his mind and body united as one, Xiang Shaolong sliced at different angles with Hundred Battle Sabre, nullifying Shan Rou's fierce and agile attacks with every stroke, causing her to be unable to launch a series of combo attacks. Shan Rou's attack resembles using a sword to cut water into half; it can never be done.

Accumulating experience from the recent years of war, Xiang Shaolong's familiarity with his sabre skills had reached another peak and he now attacks with deadly precision.

After another ten more strokes, Shan Rou is unable to gain any advantage and finally retreated after exhausting herself. Holding her sword horizontally and standing still, she aggressively glared at him with her round, almond eyes.

The spectators of the fight include the band of family warriors, Feng Fei, her fellow courtesans and their waiting maids. Also present are Zongsun Xuanhua and his ten odd followers.

Everyone in the crowd suppressed their urge to clap and cheer for fear of earning the wrath of Shan Rou the super shrew.

Her beautiful face suddenly thawing, Shan Rou giggled with a 'Pu Ci' and laughed: "Kid, you did improve significantly. I shall let you win this time round! I am sure you can hold your ground against Master."

Xiang Shaolong is worried that she would leak out the ten strokes proposal and hastily cradled his sabre and paid his respects: "Many thanks for Madam Xie's guidance!"

The crowd finally dared to cheer.

Drawing his personal sword, Zongsun Xuanhua stepped out to the front of Xiang Shaolong and smiled: "Xuanhua's hand is itching for some time already. Would Great General kindly grant some pointers."

Facing this ranked below Cao Cuidao and equal to Dan Chu Qi swordsman extraordinaire, Xiang Shaolong dare not be complacent. Brandishing his sabre horizontally to protect his front, he smiled: "Brother Xuanhua, after you!"

In trepidation of Zongsun Xuanhua's reputation, the spectators dare not even breathe loudly.

His bearing as calm as still water, Zongsun Xuanhua held his sword and took two steps forward. Xiang Shaolong instantly sensed a formidable sword aura emanating from his opponent and dare not waver. Raising his eyebrows, he moved his sabre backwards.

With his blazing eyes scanning Xiang Shaolong, Zongsun Xuanhua suddenly roared and executed a quick stab.

Xiang Shaolong is stirring with heavy emotions.

Zongsun Xuanhua's sword skills are not inferior to Guan Zhongxie's but compared to Cao Cuidao, he is still light years away. It clearly demonstrates that Cao Cuidao's talent in swordfighting is a gift from Heaven for even his most outstanding disciple is only able to inherit his skills but not his cultivation.

With a JIANG sound, Xiang Shaolong deflected the blow with his sabre.

Reeling from the enormous impact from Hundred Battle Sabre, Zongsun Xuanhua is unable to execute his subsequent moveset and was forced to retreat.

Xiang Shaolong would not allow his opponent to recompose and prepare another attack. Flourishing Hundred Battle Sabre once, he advanced and attacked Zongsun Xuanhua like relentless churning of the ocean waves.

Zongsun Xuanhua is at a disadvantage because he is unfamiliar with the attacking style of Hundred Battle Sabre.

In the meantime, he could only defend himself and took a step back every now and then.

The more Xiang Shaolong fought, the more he immersed himself into the fight, rotating between sweeping moves, narrow slashes, long strikes and short stabs. For a brief period, he even utilized close combat techniques with every sabre stroke forming a killing move, causing the audience to hold their breaths in awe and seemingly forgetting to exhale.

Between the clashes of the sabre and sword, the space between is so minute not even a strand of hair can pass through. The ladies began to shriek and trembled in fear, having the impression that they are fighting for real and are going all out to kill each other.

Only an expert like Shan Rou could tell that Xiang Shaolong has gained full control of the initiative and is holding back some of his strength and prowess. Employing all the merciless moves, he is trying to carve an understanding of Cao Cuidao's swordplay through Zongsun Xuanhua's moves.

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is changing his attacking strategy. Although his moves are amazingly slow, Zongsun Xuanhua seems to be deflecting them with greater difficulty.

Presently, Xiang Shaolong has recovered all the confidence that Cao Cuidao had frightened away, attacking, defending, advancing and retreating with ease. Every time Zongsun Xuanhua tries to counterattack, he is able to swiftly negate it, limiting Zongsun Xuanhua's potential.

In the eyes of the crowd, including Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans who do not comprehend swordfighting, Xiang Shaolong's sabre moves are ever-changing and comprises of both hard and gentle blows, giving them the sensation that he is the king of the world, dominating all his subjects from high up above.

DANG! DANG! DANG!

Stepping forward, Xiang Shaolong launched three successive sabre strokes, every stroke flawlessly chopping on the same crack of Zongsun Xuanhua's sword regardless of which direction Zongsun Xuanhua wields it. It is incredibly unbelievable to pull off a combo like that.

The long sword broke into two equal parts.

Returning the sabre to its scabbard, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Brother had the advantage of a superior weapon!"

Zongsun Xuanhua is a hero in his own right. Discarding the broken sword in his hand, he boisterously laughed: "Great General holds true to your fame. Little Brother can put his mind at ease."

Loud clapping can be heard from afar.

Feng Fei and Xiao Yuetan came up to them and Feng Fei cheerfully invited: "Feng Fei has prepared breakfast, offering our esteemed guests some hospitality. Shall we adjourn to the front hall?"

Everyone went on his or her way after breakfast is concluded.

Shan Rou is rushing home to tend to her sons while Zongsun Xuanhua, who has military duties, is off to attend to his responsibilities. Feng Fei and the courtesans resumed their rehearsal for the birthday banquet which is two days later, leaving the two men Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan in the hall to converse in secret.

In a low voice, Xiao Yuetan praised: "Cao Cuidao is truly a grandmaster and agreed to the ten strokes proposal without the slightest hesitation. However, judging by his appearance, it seems that he has discovered a way to defeat you within these ten strokes."

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a heavy burden has been lifted off his shoulders. He grinned: "This is fantastic. Regardless of any circumstances, I don't believe I cannot withstand merely ten strokes from him."

His eyes flashing with a strange glow, Xiao Yuetan warned after some uncertainty: "You cannot afford let your guard down. Shaolong had better not sheathe your sabre the minute the ten strokes are over. For all you know, Old Ghost Cao may use this opportunity to launch another two more strokes."

Xiang Shaolong light-heartedly laughed: "I don't think so! Old Cao, after all, is a grandmaster and should be a man of his word. That night, he could only stare blankly as I slipped away. You can put your mind at ease."

A flustered Xiao Yuetan is behaving as if he wanted to say something but could not due to certain reasons. He advised:

“No matter what happens, you must promise me that you will exercise extreme caution. If possible, treat it like a Hundred Strokes Agreement or even a Thousand Strokes Agreement.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: “Why is Elder Brother behaving as if you are certain that Old Cao will go back on his word?”

Xiao Yuetan dryly coughed once and gazed at him, honestly declaring: “All along, you have trusted me. Just trust me one more time.”

Xiang Shaolong may be completely baffled but never really doubted Xiao Yuetan. Changing the topic, he updated him about Li Yuan and Lord Longyang’s encounters. He also took the opportunity to enquire: “You did mention that the river route has been blockaded by ice and snow. Is it possible that you had made a mistake?”

With awkward and unnatural body language, Xiao Yuetan replied: “That is what I heard from other people. Maybe Lord Longyang’s news is more accurate than mine.”

Xiao Yuetan then changed the topic: “The entire Lin Zi city is now fervently discussing about last night’s incident when you defeated Ma Chenjia with one sabre stroke. Many of them who originally bet that you would lose to Cao Cuidao are now betting that you would win. The odds from one-to-thirteen have plummeted to one-to-five now. Looks like the odds are in your favour now!”

Remembering the gambling fever linked to Guan Zhongxie and his duel, Xiang Shaolong was amused to witness a

reenactment in Lin Zi. He chuckled: "Paying five to one is a pretty good deal. Nonetheless, my victory last night was due to coincidence and luck. It is really strange. Whenever I grip Hundred Battle Sabre in my hands, I can feel my confidence swelling."

Xiao Yuetan was delighted: "The way you chopped off Zongsun Xuanhua's long sword earlier was truly exciting, even a miracle if I may say so. No wonder the gamblers of Lin Zi have bestowed the respected title: Sabre King, to you. The title is as glamorous as the title Sword Saint and both titles are on the same par."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I know myself best. I, Sabre King, is definitely not as skillful as Sword Saint. If not for the Ten Strokes Agreement, I would have fled within these two nights."

His face flashing with a bizarre look once again, Xiao Yuetan solemnly counseled: "You must never think like this. Otherwise, you would succumb even before the ten strokes are up. Have you decided on your Lin Zi escape plan? In my opinion, Zongsun Long is more reliable."

Unconcerned with Xiao Yuetan's odd behavior, Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Relax! I believe I have attained a certain understanding of this Sword Saint. Although Zongsun Xuanhua is not as skillful as him, he can be considered a doppelganger, benefitting me to a huge extent."

Pausing, he added: "I already made it clear to Xie Ziyuan and Zongsun Xuanhua last night that I am depending on them to arrange for me to leave Lin Zi after the duel."

Satisfied, Xiao Yuetan reminded: "It would be great if you can engage Zongsun Long father and son to put Guo Kai and company under surveillance. We do not want to walk into an ambush because of our negligence."

Secretly praising his vast experience and well-rounded thinking, Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement.

A servant happened to come in and reported that Boss Jin is here to look for him. Xiao Yuetan took this opportunity to excuse himself.

Xiang Shaolong personally went to welcome Boss Jin. When the latter caught sight of him, he happily chortled: "There I was, thinking that a new hero is born. Unexpectedly, it turned out to be our famed Xiang Shaolong of the northwest. Great General has deceived me thoroughly."

Xiang Shaolong apologized: "I was forced by circumstances and hereby seek Boss's forgiveness."

Boss Jin hooked Xiang Shaolong's arm as they strode into the hall together. He whispered: "When Great General destroyed Ma Chenjia's reputation with one sabre stroke last night, it has caused a loss of face for Qi. Within these two days, there may be some desperados who will come and create a scene. Great General must take some precautions."

He continued: "There are a band of warriors standing outside but they do not appear to be the soldiers of Qi. I wonder who sent them?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong recall that they are his personal escorts that Zongsun Xuanhua had dispatched. He answered: "They are family warriors from Zongsun Residence. I did not know they had arrived."

Once they got seated, Boss Jin warned in a serious tone: "Zongsun Long father and son are not the law-abiding kinds. Once Great General is no longer useful to them, they can simply turn their cannons towards Great General."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "With my prior experience with Lu Buwei teaching me an unforgettable and excruciating lesson, I know what I am up against. While everyone knows how to butter up to the rich, someone like Boss Jin lending a critical helping hand to the unfortunate is truly rare."

His face turning red, Boss Jin explained: "Great General is giving me too much credit. This is simply my innate character and even if I suffer a loss in the process, I just cannot alter this habit. Oh yes! After Sufang learns about your genuine identity, she was quite upset and pleaded with me to invite you for a meeting with her. Since the last encounter in Xianyang, she retains a deep impression of you!"

Xiang Shaolong was bewildered. All along, Shi Sufang does not exhibit any interest in men. Why is she suddenly yearning to see him?

Back when they first met, it was due to Pu Hu (Po Hu error)'s arrangement. Now that Pu Hu has been executed for treason, it does not make any sense for her to get closer to him.

As per Xiao Yuetan's advice, he should not let his guard down. Choosing not to meet her sounds like a better choice.

Boss Jin added: "I understand that before Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao, you would need sufficient rest and inviting you to a banquet is inappropriate. Why don't we fix the appointment on the evening the day after Great General's triumph victory? What does Great General think?"

Conscious that he would have fled by then, he did not foresee any issues with temporary agreeing to the appointment. When the time comes, he would simply leave a message, asking for Shi Sufang's forgiveness. He agreed with a smile.

After some idle chatter, Boss Jin knowingly bid farewell to him.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was sending him out of the door, accompanied by Xie Ziyuan, Second Prince Tian Jian came by unexpectedly.

CHAPTER 3

Plagued By Gratitude And Hatred

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

NOT knowing that Qi Yu had let the cat out of the bag, Tian Jian firstly apologized to Xiang Shaolong for missing last night's appointment, giving the excuse that his royal father is unwell. Of course Xiang Shaolong will not expose him.

Besides Xie Ziyuan, Zongsun Long father and son, an egotistic Qixia Tutor named Yan Xiang was tagging along.

Entering the hall and seated accordingly to their status, a few pleasantries were exchanged. Finally, Tian Jian, who was seated on the VIP table, praised: "Last night, Great General

defeated Ma Chenjia with one sabre stroke; this morning, Great General utilized a special technique, breaking the precious sword of Xuanhua. Great General truly lives up to your fame and has earned our admiration.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand the reason behind him switching sides again. It is because he has proven himself to be somebody who is capable of defending himself against Cao Cuidao. He quickly uttered a modest reply while Zongsun Long and the others are praising him to the skies.

Unexpectedly, this Qixia Tutor Yan Xiang glared at him from the corner of his eye, interrupting: “Presently, in the large state of Qin, who is the real powerhouse?”

Xiang Shaolong intentionally acted surprised: “Of course it is Crown Prince Zheng. Who else can it be?”

Yan Xiang confidently retorted: “But according to Qin’s Imperial Uncle, as long as Crown Prince Zheng is not coronated, his authority is not official. What does Great General think?”

Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel the entire length of his spine turning cold. This straight-talking and arrogant Qixia Scholar has accidentally spill the beans that Lu Buwei is indeed highly suspicious of Xiao Pan’s identity and is using this claim as a means to win Tian Jian to his side.

If it turned out that Lu Buwei had already sent someone to Handan in search of the couple who raised Yingzheng, it would be a disaster for he could easily topple Xiao Pan or use it as a bargaining chip to blackmail Xiao Pan.

Noticing his change of countenance, Tian Jian quizzed: "What is Great General's opinion about this?"

His mind processing his thoughts at the speed of electricity, Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and plainly state: "Mister Yan's words has reminded me about the possibility of someone rebelling. However, the tragic consequences of Pu Bu and the others should be a wake-up call."

Xie Ziyuan laughed: "Wake-up call? Hee. What an interesting description!"

Yan Xiang posed another question: "I wonder what is Great General's impression of our Great Qi?"

Xiang Shaolong is feeling tormented as he is not used to flattering other people. He barely managed to describe: "Seeing that Mister Yan can speak in front of Second Prince without any reservations, it clearly illustrates the open mindedness of Qi's rulers, which can be interpreted as valuing talent. I believe this is also the reason behind the thriving success of Qixia College. These are just my humble observations and I hope Mister does not mind my naive thoughts."

Yan Xiang nonsensically articulated: "On the south of our Great Qi is Mount Tai, to the east is Langya Hills, to the West we have River Qing and finally Bo Ocean at the north. Thus, Qi is known as the Land protected by four passes. However, with an inefficient ruler, even if he is blessed with vast territory, millions of soldiers and supplies piling up as high as a mountain, he would still be a toothless tiger who is unable

to conquer the world. After the passing of Henggong and Guan Zhong, Qi has opened up its communication channels and rewarded those who gave constructive feedback with carriages, exquisite clothing and money, signaling our intention to attract talent all over the lands. Our Great Qi's present success is not due to pure luck."

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is listening to a conceited scholar of Qixia making all the unrealistic comments and having a taste of his shameless boasting. Yan Xiang is apparently still intoxicated in the past golden era when the King of Qi Henggong was building the country from strength to strength. He further observed the burning brilliance radiating from Tian Jian's eyes, demonstrating his pride in the words of Yan Xiang. Sighing to himself, he pretended to nod his head in agreement.

Rotating his head (like scholars composing poems), Tian Jian complimented: "Great General is very sharp to note that the success or failure of our Great Qi is closely connected to the prosperity of Qixia College. In the past, Henggong posed this question to Guan Zhong: How can I rule the lands perpetually and how can I perpetually rule without being complacent? Guan Zhong replied: *Huang Emperor appointed advisors to his state room to observe from above the virtuous. Yao Emperor had inquisitors to his public consultation room, listening to the people below. Shun had a*

*banner for comments, thus the ruler did not die.*⁴ Be cause of this statement, Qixia College was born.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own emotions stirring. As royal descendants, they would more or less be fixated on a certain past glory. For example, the people of Qi would quote Heng Gong and Guan Zhong on a daily basis. Instead of living in the past, they should seek to improve based on their present conditions, creating a new future while keeping in mind the current trends and world developments. Although he mentioned the King of Qi is open to new ideas, it can similarly be interpreted that his authority is weak. During this era of wars, being able to consolidate power, dominate politics and conquer other States is the most critical characteristic a strong ruler must possess. The fake Ying Zheng, Xiao Pan, is lucky to be free of these mental burdens of a typical royal descendant. Moreover, he is not restricted by family ties and can focus all his energy into seizing power in order to establish his own authority. Incidentally, he has become the most promising and wisest King of this generation.

It is no accident that Qin is able to annihilate the other six States and unite the lands. It is partly because no other ruler shares the same background and upbringing of Xiao Pan.

Zongsun Long interrupted: “It is a well known fact that Crown Prince Zheng relies heavily on Great General. Now

⁴ *Italic sentences are in classical Chinese and referencing the rulers of antiquity and how they took views from the good and the masses. They are translated by CFT.*

that the various states are hostile and preparing for war, does Great General have any plans to assist Qi?"

Remembering Prince Dan and Xu Yizhe, Xiang Shaolong is feeling conflicted. Zongsun Long's words are obviously hinting himself to provide the same guarantee that Lu Buwei is offering Tian Jian in order to wrest Tian Jian from the hands of Tian Dan.

On hindsight, no matter what he says, he can never change the course of history. But for Shan Rou's sake, he must come up with a commitment.

Scanning the crowd and savoring the looks of anticipation from the eyes of everyone, he officially states: "Crown Prince Zheng is still a juvenile and will only be coronated next year. As a result, he is focusing his attention on internal politics. The construction of Zhengguo Canal is taking up the bulk of his time. With regards to external invasion, he has always adopted a passive stance. One of the agendas of my trip to Qi is to affirm the strong ties between our two States."

Yan Xiang sarcastically pointed: "Ever since Yingzheng returned to Qin, Eastern Zhou has been conquered, followed by Han's Munian City and Rongyang City. There is also Zhao's Taiyuan City who was overwhelmed and became a new city of Qin. Lastly, Wei lost thirty-seven cities to Qin too. These facts do not seem to tally with Great General's statement."

Xiang Shaolong had intentionally designed his words to trick him into making this accusation. He calmly replied: "We all

know who is the perpetrator behind Eastern Zhou's military campaign. The other territories were captured by Meng Ao. I guess it is pretty obvious why Meng Ao is able to monopolize control of the Qin military." Instantly, Tian Jian's countenance changed faintly.

Xiang Shaolong's words are actually made up of half-truths. In terms of occupying territories, Xiao Pan, the future Qin Shihuang, is even greedier than Lu Buwei. Due to his adolescence, he could easily shift all responsibility to Imperial Uncle Lu Buwei who, in reality, has no authority despite such a grand title. The recent military maneuvers were indeed drafted personally by Xiao Pan but this information is not known to outsiders.

Yan Xiang is adorably honest and nodded: "Great General is right. Tian Dan is getting muddle-headed in his old age and has failed to perceive Lu Buwei's innate character. Second Prince should know who are your ideal partners by now."

Hearing this testimonial, Zongsun Long and the others are overjoyed. Tian Jian, on the other hand, was feeling awkward and dryly coughed once: "Speaking with Great General is truly enlightening. Hey! After Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao, Tian Jian will host a banquet to honour Great General."

Since nobody else has anything to add, the meeting was concluded. After Yan Xiang and the others left, Zongsun Xuanhua stayed behind and introduced Xiang Shaolong to Yao Sheng, one of the warriors that is in his escort team:

“Yao Sheng is born and bred here. If Great General requires any errands to be completed, feel free to assign the task to him directly and you need not go through us at all.” After repeating the same instructions to Yao Sheng, he took his leave.

Scrutinizing Yao Sheng, Xiang Shaolong estimated him to be around thirty years old and has eyes that glow with wisdom. With a handsome face, he comes across as someone who can remain calm and steady in any situation. Hit by a brainwave, he instructed: “I wish for Brother Yao to keep Han Chuang and Guo Kai under surveillance and report their movements to me. You must not allow them to detect your presence.”

Yao Sheng respectfully bowed: “You can call me Yao Sheng. Great General has gained my admiration. This is a small issue and I will definitely accomplish Great General’s mission.”

Finishing, he left to execute the order.

Using this break, Xiang Shaolong returned to his room for a nap. After dozing for about two hours, he woke up and discovered that Han Chuang has been waiting for him for some time. He is certain that this ungrateful fellow must be up to no good again. On the other hand, he has to visit Xiang Shaolong sooner or later; otherwise, it would arouse suspicions about himself.

After he had washed up, he received Han Chuang in the front hall.

A significantly impatient Han Chuang is already pacing up and down the hall. Noticing Xiang Shaolong, he cheered: "Shaolong is finally awake."

Observing that Han Chuang does not display the slightest sign of guilt, Xiang Shaolong was annoyed and coldly hissed: "No matter how long a dream is, one would have to wake up eventually. To think you still have the guts to come and see me."

His face turning white, Han Chuang wondered: "What is this all about? Two days ago, Lord Longyang came and tested my loyalty. Today, Shaolong is mercilessly laying blame on me. What offence did I, Han Chuang, committed?"

Advancing to his front, Xiang Shaolong stared piercingly at him with his shining eyes, accusing: "If you don't want to be caught, don't do it. You are the only person who knows that I am going to Qixia College to steal my sabre..." At this juncture, he detected Feng Fei about to enter the hall from the corner of his eye. Gesturing with his hand, he bellowed: "Mistress, please excuse yourself. I am not through yet with this ungrateful fellow."

Noticing the two men arguing heatedly, Feng Fei was shocked and her face was completely pale. She hastily retreated from the scene.

Xiang Shaolong continued: "If not for you letting the cat out of the bag, why would Cao Cuidao know about my burglary attempt and was using me to practice his sword moves?"

Han Chuang panicked: "This has nothing to do with me. Remember I was advising you not to go? Aye! How did this happen?"

Xiang Shaolong has to admit that his acting is fantastic. Originally, he wanted to apply the same deceit to Han Chuang, feeding him with lies and fabrications. However, upon seeing this 'old friend', he can feel his anger rising and lost control of his emotions.

Not willing to back down, he countered: "Would you have advised me to go instead? Putting this matter aside, why are you holding secret discussions with Guo Kai over the past few days? And even blackmailed Lord Longyang to get rid of me."

His face drained of colour, Han Chuang stammered: "Lord Longyang told you?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly smirked: "None of your business. If you even try to lay your hands on him, when I get back to Xianyang, I will expose your Zhengguo Canal Grand Plan. The very next day, I will lead an army to raid your nesting place."

Han Chuang shuddered excessively: "So you knew about everything; why did you hide it from Yingzheng?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "Don't you ungrateful fellas get it? Only by building this canal will the Qin military be tied down and unable to participate in any eastern campaigns for the next eight to ten years. It is against my desires to watch my friends become stateless citizens, which

is why I resisted exposing this matter and dealing Lu Buwei a blow. In return, how have you treated me?"

Han Chuang promptly broke down and collapsed onto his seat with hot tears sprouting out like spring water. He grieved: "I was forced by circumstances too. Someone has revealed my meeting with you to Guo Kai and he kept threatening me using hard and soft tactics. But I have tried my best and even hinted Lord Longyang to escort you out of Lin Zi. Shaolong, you must believe me! I have been doing everything within my power to obstruct Guo Kai and in fact, I came to see you today to warn you about him."

Xiang Shaolong felt that it is impossible for him to trust Han Chuang like before because his acting is simply amazing. He sighed with another breath: "How then, do you explain the sabre theft tip-off?"

With a mixture of tears and snot on his face, Han Chuang wept: "If I was the one who leaked this information, may I die within a year! I am heavily indebted to Shaolong and no matter how heartless I, Han Chuang, am, I would never stoop to such a despicable act."

Xiang Shaolong reflected: Could it be somebody else eavesdropping on their conversation and overhearing this exchange?

By now, his anger has been appeased and he sat down besides Han Chuang, castigating: "You are a grown man; can you stop crying like a damsel in distress?"

Using his sleeves to wipe his tears, Han Chuang shook his head in a pitiful manner, wheezing: "Over the past few days, I spent all my waking hours locking horns with antagonists. The pain is almost unbearable. Now that Shaolong has given me a piece of your mind, I somehow felt much better."

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong consoled: "You should go home! Both of us should spend some time in quiet contemplation."

Han Chuang cautioned: "There is one thing Shaolong must never underestimate: Guo Kai is in cahoots with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan, going all out to prevent you from ever returning to Xianyang. Qi, after all, is Tian Dan's playground. If you are negligent, you may fall into his ambush."

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "As long as my friends don't betray me, I can handle any situation. This matter is far from simple, you had better not get involved or Guo Kai may take you down as well."

He then frostily grunted: "It seems like I, Xiang Shaolong, is a pushover in their eyes. Guo Kai this old thief must be tired of living."

Han Chuang exhaled a breath of cold air and mused: "I finally had a taste of Shaolong's unimaginable forbearance and magnanimous attitude. Before your match with Cao Cuidao, Lu Buwei and Guo Kai should be keeping their paws off you. But if you happened to win, the situation will be entirely different!"

Seizing Han Chuang, Xiang Shaolong pushed him towards the main door and hinted: "Go back and tell Guo Kai, tell him that for the glory of Qin Swordsmen, I will definitely have a go with Cao Cuidao."

Han Chuang was immensely shocked: "Aren't you planning to flee the city before that?"

Pushing him straight out of the door, Xiang Shaolong smiled in return but did not offer a reply.

After tearing off Han Chuang's mask, he felt much more peaceful. Lord Longyang is right. Although Han Chuang is no noble character, his friendship towards him is sincere. Greatly comforted by this fact, he was glad that human goodness does exist in everyone.

Currently, he can no longer differentiate between friend or foe. Except for Shan Rou and Xiao Yuetan, he would never place his full trust in anyone else, including Li Yuan and Lord Longyang. Who can guarantee that they may not have a change of heart or are simply lying to him from day one.

This is the first time in his life when he cannot distinguish between his allies and his enemies.

Barely stepping over the door ledge, he was welcomed by Feng Fei. She quizzed: "What is going on between you and Marquis Chuang?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "It is nothing. It is now sunshine after the rain."

Feng Fei slowly and sadly shot him a look, angrily interrogating: "Why didn't you come over last night? Am I, Feng Fei, not worthy of Great General's attention?"

Xiang Shaolong groaned: "It is the exact opposite. I am concerned that after relishing Mistress's enticing body, I would lose control of my emotions. That will give rise to unforeseeable consequences while we are trying to escape."

Putting on an air of disdain, Feng Fei admonished: "Will you stop linking every issue to that? The situation is very clear to me now. Even those who hate you to the core are unable to do anything to you. Since you do not love me, why don't you simply say so!"

Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel the heavy thumping in his head. Pulling her sleeve, he led her towards the inner courtyard and changed the topic: "Aren't Shuzen and the others rehearsing? How can they do a good job with you, First Mistress, giving instructions by the side?"

Feng Fei giggled with a 'Pu Ci'. She chuckled: "You ah... Your best skill is skirting issues whenever they become too hot for you to handle. Now that I do not have a lover, I may lose control one night and slip underneath your blankets while you are in bed. When that happens, I want to see how long you can hold out."

Aroused, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Didn't Mistress say your heart is dead? Why are you suddenly so passionate again?"

Curling her cute little mouth, Feng Fei coquettishly stared at him, censuring: "It is all your fault, trying to seduce me while

acting gentlemanly, hugging me when you feel like it and giving me deep kisses whenever you are in the mood. Even your words are amorous and ambiguous. Feng Fei is just an ordinary lady and would naturally seek your love and attention after being stimulated by you on multiple occasions.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own urges rising but reminded himself that this rare beauty Feng Fei is better left untouched. Fortunately, all his desires for her would vanish straightaway whenever he thinks of her past affections for Han Jie.

He is no longer the same Xiang Shaolong who arrived in this era years ago. Growing out of the age of one night stands, he would now consider the consequences of his actions.

Suppressing his agitation with all his willpower, Xiang Shaolong solemnly explained: “Isn’t our present relationship perfect? Once we are physically involved, the gameplay would be totally different and in the future, you would abhor me for being a heartless man.”

By now, Feng Fei has arrived at the stone steps leading to her chambers. Halting her footsteps, her eyebrows tightened slightly to form an indistinct frown. Seconds later, she displayed a smile, acknowledging: “Great General is right. Once you have obtained my body and yet do not marry Feng Fei, Feng Fei would certainly be resentful despite promising earlier that there are no strings attached.”

Seeing that she is so understanding, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: "Why don't we just limit ourselves to hugging and kissing, Ouch!"

Shoving him away with a push, Feng Fei glared at him viciously before breaking out into a sweet smile and proceeded to climb the stairs to the upper deck.

Xiang Shaolong had to summon every shred of his willpower to prevent himself from following her upstairs. Turning around, he left.

To avoid getting himself into trouble, Xiang Shaolong chose to spend his whole day within Tingsong Villa. Nevertheless, he could not avoid the provocation of the courtesans. Among his harassers, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen are obviously included and so are Xinyue and Yunniang who kept trying to get into his good books.

Fortunately, he has already made up his mind to run away from here once he managed to withstand Cao Cuidao's ten blows. Otherwise, if these harassments were to continue, he may lose his inhibitions one day and fall into this beauty trap.

In the evening, Xiao Yuetan came looking for him and the two men headed to the garden for a stroll. After Xiang Shaolong described his encounter with Han Chuang to Xiao Yuetan, the latter's face lost colour: "Shaolong should not have disclosed your knowledge about Zhengguo Canal; this may inadvertently force Han Chuang to kill you."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: “Are you sure? He was crying his eyes out and his nose was running. It was a genuine display of emotions!”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “All human beings are made this way. In the heat of the moment, they would react emotionally but after careful consideration and weighing the pros and cons, they would cast aside all personal relationships for the sake of their country.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head: “Elder Brother’s words always makes the most sense. Luckily, I need not depend on him. Zongsun Long and I are in a mutually beneficial partnership; he should be much more reliable!”

Xiao Yuetan bitterly smiled: “This is precisely why I came to look for you. Remember Zongsun Heji? He just gave me a fresh update, reporting that Han Jie brought Lu Buwei to pay a visit to Zongsun Long father and son. However, he is not aware about their meeting agenda.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Doesn’t Lu Buwei fear Tian Dan’s wrath?”

Xiao Yuetan coldly sniggered: “Doesn’t Shaolong understand this Old Thief by now? Tian Dan is getting on in years and is no longer the Tian Dan of the past. Due to his early contributions, the royal family is still accommodating towards him. One of the reasons why the King of Qi stripped Tian Sheng of his Crown Prince title is because Tian Sheng approves Tian Dan’s demands unquestioningly. Moreover,

Lu Buwei is known for securing his objectives at all costs, even if it includes working together with his past enemies.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “I am conscious that Zongsun Long is no gentleman but presently, I am much more useful to him compared to Lu Buwei. I am confident that he would not switch sides.”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “Do not underestimate Lu Buwei. For him to openly approach Zongsun Long, I am sure he has some compelling reasons. All you need to do is wait and see if Zongsun Long would take the initiative to tell you about Lu Buwei’s visit. From there, you can determine if they are still loyal to you or not.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed, recalling Xiao Pan’s identity crisis. If Lu Buwei is using this trump card on Zongsun Long father and son, it is possible that they may switch allegiance to Lu Buwei.

Another critical aspect is Han Jie’s unique status. With him moderating the discussion and aligning their interests, it is possible for the impossible to happen.

At the end of the day, Zongsun Long is still hankering after Feng Fei. If he assumes Xiang Shaolong to be simply a paper tiger, this calculative bloodsucker may harden his resolve and commit himself to the unexpected.

Ultimately, the people of Qi share the mentality of the other five eastern States, regarding Xiang Shaolong as the number one enemy. Years ago, Qin General Bai Qi inflicted catastrophic damages upon them. Now that he, Xiang

Shaolong, is widely acknowledged as the Bai Qi of today, who wouldn't wish to see him dead?

Based on these fresh developments, his grand plan is no longer viable and he has to reconsider the trustworthiness of his 'allies'.

Even if he is all alone by himself, most of his tasks are still accomplishable. The problem is that he cannot abandon Feng Fei.

Xiao Yuetan's voice sounded beside his ear: "For the next two days, we must brainstorm and formulate a plan to slip away without anyone's knowledge."

Xiang Shaolong realized that the situation must be really deplorable if even this wise and experienced friend is feeling the same helplessness as him. It looks like the best way out is for him to slip away first while imploring Xie Ziyuan to extend his protection to Feng Fei.

The golden question remains: Is Xie Ziyuan able to do so?

CHAPTER 4

Discovering A Shocking Conspiracy

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THAT very night, Zongsun Xuanhua came to visit Xiang Shaolong. After opening the conversation with some unimportant topics, he quizzed: “Xuanhua is curious about one thing: When the Crown Prince was escorted back to Xianyang from Handan, there were rumours circulating that he was an illegitimate son of Lu Buwei. Even the royal family and court officials were aware of it. However, why did they continue to give him their full support?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly horrified and troubled. It is not Zongsun Xuanhua's question that he was worried about but the agenda behind the question.

In the past, he was only suspicious but right now, he is fully convinced that Lu Buwei has grasped the Achilles' heel of him and Xiao Pan. Given Lu Buwei's prowess, he could easily employ several hard or soft tactics and 'invite' the foster parents of the real Yingzheng back to Xianyang from Handan. By then, he could effortlessly use these witnesses to blackmail Xiao Pan.

Thinking about this point, Xiang Shaolong could not help but secretly detest Zhu Ji. However, it is possible that she does not care if Xiao Pan is her own son or not. As a result, for her to reveal this secret is no big deal, which is why it is not surprising for her to disclose this fact to Lao Ai after being sweet-talked by him.

This is indeed the only way Lu Buwei can salvage the entire situation.

If this scandal is exposed, Xiao Pan and him, Xiang Shaolong, would be labeled as conmen. Everyone who is related to or supportive of them would receive the heaviest mental blow and suffer a drastic change of lifestyle.

Within Qin, Lu Buwei is already deep-seated in power. By forcing Zhu Ji to join hands and publicly stripping Xiao Pan of the Crown Prince title, he can then support an incompetent royal family member to succeed the throne, wielding full

power over the country indirectly. By then, he can easily dispose Lao Ai, leaving his authority unchallenged.

Although history will remain unaltered, Xiang Shaolong is currently mired in the centre of it all and cannot take things for granted. It is like fate; until an event has factually happened, who can know for sure that it is due to fate? Therefore, his heart is filled with anxiety.

Lu Buwei must have leaked certain clues regarding the matter to Zongsun Long father and son, instigating Zongsun Xuanhua to specially approach him and test Lu Buwei's theories. Once tested, they can make up their minds to switch sides to Lu Buwei or continue to partner Xiang Shaolong.

On the surface, Xiang Shaolong naturally put on a leisurely appearance, concealing the horror within his heart. He replied with a tinge of surprise: "This matter has long been concluded. Years ago, to satisfy Lu Gong's suspicions, a blood test was administered and it is proven that Crown Prince Zheng and Lu Buwei are not related in any way."

Zongsun Xuanhua laughed mysteriously: "I heard the blood of Crown Prince was personally drawn by Great General!"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be astonished: "Brother Xuanhua knows about this too?"

With an unnatural body language, Zongsun Xuanhua replied: "This information was lifted off Tian Dan, provoking my curiosity about another question. It is rumoured that even Qin's Empress (Zhu) Ji is uncertain whether Crown Prince

Zheng is the son of Lu Buwei or the late King; why would Great General have the guts to administer the blood test? If it turns out that Lu Buwei is the real father, what would Great General do?"

Xiang Shaolong is already prepared for this question from him; in fact, it could be due to Lu Buwei egging him to make this inquiry on his behalf. If Xiang Shaolong displayed any signs of hesitation, Zongsun Xuanhua would know that Lu Buwei is telling the truth. It also meant that Lu Buwei could use this fact to topple Xiao Pan. Hence, they should cross over to Lu Buwei's side of the fence and plot against Xiang Shaolong.

From Zongsun Long's point of view, it would be ideal if Qin is plagued with infighting and subsequently declined from strong to weak, allowing Qi to have an opportunity to be the next dominant State.

Additionally, if Cao Cuidao happened to kill Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan would have lost a powerful ally and may consequently be defeated by Lu Buwei.

Utilizing all his acting skills to put up a nonchalant front, Xiang Shaolong casually remarked: "It is simply a smokescreen created by Empress. During that period, Lu Buwei has a monopoly on power and fearing for the safety of her son, Empress deliberately created a confusing scenario. Without a doubt, Crown Prince is the son of the late King."

Zongsun Xuanhua was contemplating for some time before suppressing his voice and asking: "There is something that Xuanhua wants to say but does not know if it is inappropriate. If I cause any offence, I hope Great General will not hold it against me."

Xiang Shaolong could already guess what he wanted to say next and even deduced that it was Lu Buwei who instructed him to do so. On one hand, he could test his own reaction and on the other hand, he could distract him mentally, causing him to perish under Cao Cuidao's sword because of emotional baggage. Xiang Shaolong pretended to laugh: "There is nothing to hide. Brother Xuanhua can speak your mind without any reservations."

Zongsun Xuanhua tried to say something but the words never left his lips. After some time, he finally uttered: "We have a spy within Tian Dan's residence. According to him, Lu Buwei told Tian Dan he has already gathered sufficient evidence: There is a couple who lives in Handan's public housing and they can provide additional information on Crown Prince's identity."

Xiang Shaolong is even more convinced than before that this is Lu Buwei's ultimate scheme. As his heart sank all the way down, his external expression was that of surprise, followed by loud laughter: "Lu Buwei is getting more and more muddle-headed. He must be referring to the foster parents who raised Crown Prince. A long time ago, Crown Prince has already arranged for them to move to Xianyang. However,

this is a highly confidential issue and only a handful of people are aware of it. Has Lu Buwei gone mad?"

These words are simply brilliant. It is as good as telling Zongsun Xuanhua that even if there is a problem, the problem has already been solved even before it arises.

It is now Zongsun Xuanhua's turn to be greatly surprised. After a short daze, he laughed along: "My sentiments exactly. If I were Crown Prince, I would naturally fetch my foster parents back to Xianyang and allow them to retire happily in return for raising me for so many years."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, accepting the fact that he is not heartless enough to be a good politician. If it was someone else, he would have murdered that couple before leaving Handan, preventing a similar calamity from occurring today.

At that point in time, he did not even consider this aspect and even when he recalled this affair later, he simply brushed it off. This is also because only three individuals, him, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan knows about the couple's name and address. Unexpectedly, Zhu Ji leaked this information.

Losing the interest to speak further, Zongsun Xuanhua mentioned some unrelated topics before bidding farewell.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is going to rendezvous with Lu Buwei. Hit by a brainwave, he checked: "Will Brother Xuanhua see Official Xie tomorrow?"

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: "Do you need Xuanhua to pass a message to him?"

Xiang Shaolong made up a story: "I have something for him and have to trouble Brother Xuanhua to pass it to him on my behalf. Brother Xuanhua, please wait for a while."

Finishing his sentences, Xiang Shaolong swiftly returned to his room and changed into dark coloured clothes and fitted his climbing apparatus. Concealing his new outfit with a coat, he went back to Zongsun Xuanhua and apologized: "I forgot that I have already sent the item to Official Xie's residence. There is no need to bother Brother Xuanhua anymore." Zongsun Xuanhua did not suspect anything and left after assuring Xiang Shaolong repeatedly that it is no trouble at all.

Pulling up his hood, Xiang Shaolong slipped out into the streets via a side door. He brisk-walked in the direction of Zongsun Xuanhua's carriage.

Not only does Xiao Pan's identity predicament affect his and Xiao Pan's reputation, it encompasses the life and death of many other families. For the first time, he could understand the dilemma that Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and the others are facing. In the 21st century, only the criminal alone is being punished.

If he got into trouble during this era, not only will his wives and son receive the same punishment but the entire Wu Family Clan and even Teng Yi and Jing Jun's clans would be exterminated.

In conclusion, the more information he possess regarding this issue, the better can he handle this huge disaster.

Since the beginning of history, gathering intelligence is always the first priority for any army. Since there are no tapping devices for him to employ in this era, he could only personally venture out and hear for himself what are the schemes Lu Buwei is cooking up with Zongsun Xuanhua.

Fortunately, he has been through Special Forces training, making him a professional at sneaking into urban areas. Compared to the skyscrapers of the 21st century, the properties of this era are defenceless playgrounds in his eyes. As long as he can avoid detection by family warriors and guard dogs, he can trespass any residence at will.

Today, Zongsun Xuanhua is only engaging a small convoy, comprising of a single carriage and a handful of followers. As the roads are occupied by numerous carriages driving up and down, their convoy is hobbling along at a snail's pace. By increasing his pace, Xiang Shaolong easily overtook his carriage and is waiting for him at the front.

According to his estimates, Lu Buwei would not be meeting Zongsun Xuanhua at the Chancellor Residence where he is currently lodging.

At the end of the day, Tian Dan and Zongsun Long father and son are at loggerheads with each other. Despite Lu Buwei's overbearing character, there is no way the meeting can be held right in front of Tian Dan's eyes.

Although it is not snowing tonight, the weather is still freezing. Compared to the earlier nights with snow flying all around, the temperature is definitely much more hospitable. Furthermore, the bone chilling winter wind has stopped blowing.

Due to the thriving economy, more and more politically savvy tycoons like Zongsun Long are emerging. His own Wu Family, Lu Buwei and even Qin Qing are shining examples.

In the midst of his thoughts, Zongsun Xuanhua's horse carriage made an unanticipated stop. Scrutinizing the courtyard in question, the entire length of Xiang Shaolong's spine turned cold.

It turned out to be Li Yuan's Tingzhu Villa which is two streets away from Tingsong Villa.

While the carriage is driving into the compound, Xiang Shaolong has already familiarized himself with the place and entered by climbing over a side wall.

These ten odd courtyards are used specially to host foreign dignitaries and are similar in design. Since he has memorized the layout of Tingsong Villa, navigating Tingzhu Villa is child's play to him.

Demonstrating his dexterities and forte as a Special Forces member, with a mixture of quick darts and slow steps, he made his way across the side garden while avoiding the occasional family warrior on patrol. Ascending the main block which overlooks the front and back courtyard, he landed on the roof about the same time Zongsun Xuanhua

entered the building from below, clearly displaying his incredible climbing skills.

Within seconds, Zongsun Xuanhua exited from the other side of the main building and took the corridor leading towards the Eastern Chamber. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly slid down the building with the aid of a grappling hook. Using bushes and trees as cover, he scampered to the west window of the Eastern Chamber. Underneath the translucent window where the illumination of a lamp is barely visible, he squatted down and began eavesdropping in silence. As it is bright inside the chamber and dark on the outside, his shadow would not shine into the chamber. Li Yuan's voice sounded: "Xuanhua, pray take a seat before speaking."

What followed were sounds of tea pouring and someone sitting down.

Xiang Shaolong reprimanded himself for not being thorough in his contemplation. When he first met Li Yuan here, he was conducting a secret discussion with Zongsun Long, clearly illustrating their intimacy.

In addition, Lady Qingxiu did warn him on two occasions to take precautions against Li Yuan. However, Li Yuan managed to utterly deceive him with just a few sentences, gaining his full confidence again and again. It is also partly due to his habit of judging others with an overly positive perspective.

In fact, regardless of Li Yuan, Han Chuang or Lord Longyang, they are all true blue politicians who prioritize benefits and gains over relationships and emotions.

Lord Longyang is probably not as unscrupulous as the rest. But with regards to Li Yuan, it is obvious that he is able to cast aside his hatred towards Xiang Shaolong for snatching Ji Yanran away and work hand in hand with him in Shouchun. This clearly proves that he values power and status. Anything else is secondary.

If he had succumbed to his laziness and did not stalk Zongsun Xuanhua, he would probably die without knowing the truth behind his death.

Li Yuan is truly intelligent to reveal Han Chuang's betrayal, misleading Xiang Shaolong that he values his past contributions.

As the sound of footsteps of the dismissed servants faded away, it was replaced by sounds of sipping tea and wine.

From the noises generated, it seems like there is more than just Li Yuan and Zongsun Xuanhua in the room. As anticipated, Zongsun Long's voice sounded: "What explanation did Xiang Shaolong offer?"

Zongsun Xuanhua sighed with a breath of air: "The circumstances may be different from what the cunning old fox Lu Buwei has described. Not only did Xiang Shaolong didn't show any signs of shock, he even mentioned that Yingzheng had fetched that couple back to Xianyang. Aye!"

Another man countered: "Didn't Lu Buwei say that he has custody of the couple?"

Xiang Shaolong can sense his entire body shuddering. Besides being alarmed at these words, he was also shaken upon recognizing the speaker. It is none other than Han Chuang who had been cursing himself and crying his eyes out to him earlier today.

In an unhurried tone, another gentle and familiar voice sounded: "Xuanhua, why don't you reiterate the full chronicles before we draw any conclusions and decide if Xiang Shaolong is lying or Lu Buwei is spouting nonsense."

His heart sank all the way to the bottom for he could identify this speaker to be his nemesis Guo Kai.

Presently, he can confirm Lady Qingxiu's implicit meaning and unspoken warning: Li Yuan, Guo Kai and Han Chuang are working together against him. However, he did not expect Zongsun Long to be involved too.

After delving on it, he is certain that Zongsun Long father and son joined their gang at a later stage, explaining their earlier sincere behavior. They probably entered this collaboration after Lu Buwei's visit.

As his thoughts trained till this point, Zongsun Xuanhua had articulated the chain of events and he added: "Throughout the exchange, not only did Xiang Shaolong fail to exhibit any signs of agitation, inversely, he found the whole affair pretty hilarious. If I were in his shoes, I would definitely freak out."

Disappointed sighs echoed from the hall.

Guo Kai lamented: "If this is true, we would have lost a golden opportunity to topple Yingzheng. This kid is smart and formidable; his methods are deadly and devastating. With his overwhelming ambitions, we can forget about getting a good night's sleep if he officially becomes the King of Qin."

Li Yuan wondered: "Xiang Shaolong is a talent when it comes to faking reactions and he is blessed with quick reflexes. Could he be actually reeling in shock but was able to conceal it?"

Zongsun Long mourned: "If he hadn't chased away the men that I have bribed, we would be able to find out what is his after-reaction."

Han Chuang analyzed: "Judging from Lu Buwei's tone when he spoke to Master Long, he probably got the couple's Handan address from Lao Ai just as he was departing from Xianyang. Otherwise, Xianyang would have degenerated into chaos and he definitely cannot spare the time to come to Lin Zi. Therefore, I am certain that he cannot guarantee actual custody of the witnesses." Zongsun Long grieved: "In this case, Xiang Shaolong is not lying."

Guo Kai viciously declared: "No matter what, we must never let Xiang Shaolong return to Xianyang alive. Without him, Yingzheng is merely a toothless tiger and may perish under the hands of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. From then on, Qin would be riddled with internal strife and subsequently lack the means to invade eastwards."

Zongsun Long quickly interrupted: "We need to discuss this further. Lu Buwei only wishes to blind him, letting him stay alive to answer treason charges when he returns to Xianyang."

Petrified and infuriated, Xiang Shaolong can only listen on helplessly outside the window.

Han Chuang faintly sighed: "I rather he loses his life under the sword of Grandmaster Cao than to see him becoming a blind man."

Li Yuan calmly reasoned: "The interests of the State comes first and personal relationships do not account for anything. Xiang Shaolong can only blame himself for becoming another Bai Qi of Qin. If he happened to die at the hands of Grandmaster Cao, so be it. Otherwise, we must step into destroy him. Because of his affairs, I haven't slept well in days. Whenever I visualize tens of thousands of common folks and children of the Eastern States being trampled by the aggressive army of Qin, I cannot help but discard all my feelings of gratitude and friendship."

Guo Kai warned in a scheming tone: "We must take precautions against Lord Longyang. Unlike Chancellor Li and Marquis Chuang, I don't think he sees the big picture."

Zongsun Xuanhua cautioned: "We must execute our plans carefully. If Yingzheng eventually became King and Xiang Shaolong happened to die in Lin Zi, Qi would be in hot soup."

Guo Kai laughed: "We can simply frame Lu Buwei for it and let Yingzheng focus all his hatred onto Lu Buwei. While they

are at each other's throats, we can raise our wine cups in celebration."

Li Yuan reminded Zongsun Long father and son: "Second Prince and Xie Ziyuan must not know about this; otherwise, there may be unforeseen developments. I have already gotten Lady Ning to hint Second Prince that his King father is unhappy with First Prince mainly because of his close ties with Tian Dan. Thus, Second Prince should know what to do and Xiang Shaolong is no longer of any use. Moreover, I did make it clear to Second Prince, telling him that as long as Tian Dan stays in power, Qi and Chu will never be allies. In fact, the outcome has been established. The King of Qi just relayed a new order, commanding First Prince to leave Lin Zi before the birthday banquet. I am sure it is as clear as day what the end result will be." Zongsun Long father and son hastily responded and professed their thanks.

Li Yuan additionally instructed: "The two of you must do your best to deceive Xiang Shaolong and gain his full trust, misleading him into thinking that Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are scheming against him. Try to arrange for his getaway after his duel with Grandmaster Cao and have someone ambush him along the way. It would be ideal if you can sacrifice some men during the ambush and give him the impression that it is Lu Buwei trying to blind him. That would result in mayhem within the Court of Qin."

Guo Kai supplemented: "Try to communicate to Xiang Shaolong that Lu Buwei wants to keep him alive in order to

face criminal charges back in Xianyang. That would surely complicate matters between them.”

Pausing, he added: “We must keep this secret from Lord Longyang. If Xiang Shaolong learns about this, based on his unfathomable skills, he may clandestinely slip away first. With him alive, Master Long can forget about laying his hands on Feng Fei.”

It is now Xiang Shaolong’s turn to coldly snigger to himself. He has given up all hope on Han Chuang and Li Yuan while doubting that they can inflict any harm on him.

At this juncture, he knows that it is unwise for him to loiter around and he swiftly departed.

His biggest burden now is how to safely escort Feng Fei away. As he does not wish to implicate Lord Longyang, Shan Rou or Xie Ziyuan, the only confidante that remains is Xiao Yuetan.

CHAPTER 5

Unexpected Gains

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

SHAN ROU wailed: "I quit!" Withdrawing her sword, she retreated.

Resting the back of the sabre on his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Despite raising two kids, Madam Xie can still pack a punch."

Staring curiously at him, Shan Rou was amazed: "Stop bluffing. Why have you improved so much compared to yesterday? Every sabre stroke is beyond my anticipation."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that due to motivation from his predicament and hurt from his friends' betrayal, he is now brimming with immense willpower and fighting spirit for the sake of his family and his own survival. He has decided to fully commit himself and discarded all non-related considerations. Treating this duel as a final showdown where he would be staring at the face of death, he managed to unleash his hidden potential.

As per his instructions, the huge crowd that was present yesterday is absent today. Exchanging blows with this beauty who used to be intimate with him, Xiang Shaolong is exceedingly alert.

Since his return last night, he surprisingly slept all the way till dawn. Before Shan Rou arrived, he had already practiced a round of Hundred Battle Sabre Play, explaining his remarkable familiarity.

He is no longer worried about Cao Cuidao's duel that is taking place two nights later. As long as this opponent keeps his promise of limiting the fight to ten strokes, he is confident that he will emerge unscathed.

Now that he is aware of Zongsun Long, Li Yuan and the others who are plotting against him, he is mentally prepared and knows what to expect in the future, increasing his conviction level.

Perhaps now that he has finally determined his friends and foes, and admitting that Xiao Pan's identity crisis cannot be

solved by pure luck, all his doubts are cleared and the days of wild speculation are over, allowing him to sleep in peace.

It does not mean that he has found a way to counter Lu Buwei and Lao Ai but his gut feel tells him that history will not be altered and Xiao Pan will certainly become Qin Shihuang. There is no documentation of him, Xiang Shaolong, as a historical figure and naturally no record of him creating a fake Yingzheng. This clearly illustrates the ability of Xiao Pan to protect his legacy but there is no indication if he, Xiang Shaolong can preserve his life in this incoming onslaught.

Somehow, the more Xiang Shaolong thought about it, the more fearful he felt. Luckily, Little Ping'er came by at this juncture, announcing that Feng Fei has invited the two of them to her main building for breakfast. Feng Fei is still unable to comprehend the relationship between Shan Rou and Xiang Shaolong. By right, they should be newly acquainted but their mannerism is too friendly for her to stomach. To her, Shan Rou's lack of respect towards Xiang Shaolong is something exceptionally baffling. After all, Xiang Shaolong is currently a powerful and popular Qin Great General.

Without Xiao Yuetan and Zongsun Xuanhua around, Shan Rou is even less inhibited. Squinting her eyes at Xiang Shaolong first, she then peeped at Feng Fei before enquiring from her: "This fella is very good at seducing ladies; have you become one of his women?"

Feng Fei was so embarrassed that even the root of her ears turned red in an instant, wishing that she could find a hole in the ground to hide her face.

Xiang Shaolong was mortified at Shan Rou's broaching of this taboo subject. He chided: "How can Madam Xie ask such a question?"

With a 'Pu Ci', Shan Rou giggled: "Why is everyone afraid of telling the simple truth? Just answer Yes or No!" With her innocent schoolgirl laughter, it is truly impossible to get angry with her.

Enduring her bashfulness, Feng Fei resumed her well-versed calm demeanor and replied in a low voice: "The relationship between Feng Fei and Great General is prim and proper and we are definitely not an item. Madam Xie has wronged Great General; He is a true gentleman." Pausing for a while, she inquired in return: "Are Madam Xie and Great General previously acquainted? It is rumoured that Madam Xie's swordsmanship is comparable to Young Master Zongsun, gaining much glory for us females."

Shan Rou was not the least flattered and asserted: "I am who I am, why must I compare myself against men for glory? Hng! I have to go, I have some errands to run in the palace." Raising her sleeve and using it to wipe her mouth, she left without even looking back.

Xiang Shaolong and Feng Fei stared at each other with a stunned expression before smiling with amusement.

Feng Fei state in a low voice: "I heard Madam Xie's original surname is Shan and her family was destroyed by Tian Dan. However, she has now gained the affections of the concubines of the King and Princes who are all begging her to impart sword skills to them. In addition, Xie Ziyuan is highly regarded by the Court of Qi. Faced with her constant and direct insults, even Tian Dan has to bear with her."

Xiang Shaolong finally learned about Shan Rou's status in Lin Zi and understood why Zongsun Xuanhua is so accommodating towards her.

Feng Fei continued: "Are we leaving here the night after tomorrow? I am getting tired of Han Jie's harassment and desire to leave this place as soon as possible."

Xiang Shaolong wavered on the spot, unable to determine if Feng Fei can be trusted. The fluctuation of a woman's affections is hard to grasp. Today, she can say that she hates Han Jie but tomorrow, she can leap back into his bosom. If she reveals his secrets, he would have to return to Xianyang as a blind man.

Noticing the change in his expression, Feng Fei had a shock and questioned: "Is there something wrong with our plans?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Does Mistress wish to leave Lin Zi after the Qixia College performance?"

After a short daze, Feng Fei responded: "Since we are leaving, why do we need to wait another five days?"

Xiang Shaolong intentionally answered: "The main reason is for Second Mistress and the others. I would feel more at ease if we leave as a group."

Feng Fei is truly sharp. Sighing with a breath, she observed: "Looking at you hesitating and carefully choosing your words, you must be withholding some grievances in your heart."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that if he chooses to deny, it would arouse her suspicions. Nodding his head, he professed: "I am concerned about Guo Kai. This man is a devil. If we successfully make our getaway, he may vent his frustration on Shuzen and the others."

Feng Fei was astounded: "With Zongsun Long protecting Shuzen and the others, what is there to fear?"

At his wit's end, Xiang Shaolong firmly concluded: "Stop asking any more questions. To avoid any unwelcomed surprises, we will only leave together as a group after the Qixia College performance. Aren't you concerned about their welfare?"

Feng Fei kept quiet and mounted a silent protest.

Xiang Shaolong realized that his tone is too harsh. Shifting forward and hugging her fragrant shoulder, he gently apologized: "It is my fault. I beg Mistress's pardon."

Feng Fei softly exhaled: "Why is Great General is such a bad mood today? This is the first time Feng Fei has seen you getting upset for no rhyme or reason."

Xiang Shaolong thought: How can I be in excellent spirits now? How I wish I could embark on a killing spree to vent the anger in my heart. He was about to utter a reply when Feng Fei admitted with a tinge of guilt: "Feng Fei knows that you no longer trust me because I went to meet Han Jie in secret yesterday. But since we are breaking up, we should at least formally communicate about it!"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect this amazing and accidental side effect from his moody temperament, coincidentally getting Feng Fei to make a spontaneous confession about her meeting with Han Jie. Based on her words, she had initially wanted to hide it from him.

Staring at him with a melancholic expression, Feng Fei slowly hinted: "Does Great General want to know what did he and Feng Fei talk about?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Of course he would say things like you would meet a terrible ending if you choose to side with me!"

Her petite frame trembling violently, Feng Fei was horrified: "How did you know?" Observing her shyness, Xiang Shaolong decided to trick her: "Not only did I overhear your conversation, I even heard the two of you sharing a kiss."

Feng Fei was embarrassed to the max. She protested: "He forced himself on me and I was the unwilling party. But it is daytime, where were you hiding?"

Xiang Shaolong continued fabricating: "Don't you know that a human can easily conceal himself under a carriage?"

Assuming that he is telling the truth, Feng Fei pitifully wailed: "You should understand that I was only trying my best to appease him. Most of time, I was lying to him."

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong recollected Lu Buwei's visit to Zongsun Long last night and connected it to Han Jie who had lifted the information off Feng Fei. He frowned: "But it is wrong of you to tell Han Jie that we are leaving Lin Zi in two days and are depending on Zongsun Long's assistance. Doesn't Mistress know that Han Jie and Lu Buwei are partners in crime?"

With these words from Xiang Shaolong, Feng Fei no longer has any doubts about him spying on her meeting with Han Jie. She explained: "Han Jie belongs to Lao Ai's camp and he came all the way to Lin Zi because of me. Although he was not upfront with me about his liaisons with Zongsun Xuanhua, my heart did once belonged to him and we even planned a secret rendezvous. It is very agonizing for me to sever this relationship so abruptly." Shooting Xiang Shaolong a dejected look, she added: "Feng Fei had wanted to borrow Great General as a temporary substitute to forget him but Great General is reluctant to grant this favour."

Acknowledging that Feng Fei will be an important factor in this tussle between him and his enemies, Xiang Shaolong is determined to win her to his side. He icily laughed: "Do you know that after Han Jie learnt about our relationship with Zongsun Long father and son, Lu Buwei and Han Jie visited them last night and persuaded them to work together?"

Her face whitening, Feng Fei stammered: "Is that so?"

Xiang Shaolong solemnly declared: "Believe it or not. If Mistress continues to feed information to Han Jie, not only would I, Xiang Shaolong, die without a burial place but even Mistress would not be able to escape a dreadful consequence. Han Jie's feelings towards you may be true but a man like him who prioritizes benefits over everything else may painfully sacrifice you. It is impossible to find a magnanimous man among the followers of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai."

A guilty Feng Fei admitted: "Feng Fei is not considered a magnanimous person too. What should we do now?"

Xiang Shaolong resolved: "It is better for us to leave as a group after the Qixia College performance. At Xianyang, you can fall in love with whoever you want but for the time being, you must never reveal any of our secrets."

Feng Fei swore: "I understand. From this minute onwards, Feng Fei will only trust Great General and nobody else."

At this interval, Xiang Shaolong could not think of any use for Feng Fei yet. After dispensing further instructions, he stood up and left.

This can be considered an unexpected gain for Xiang Shaolong. He finally learned about Han Jie being a double-headed snake, in cahoots with both Lu Buwei and the Zongsun Family. If his estimate is accurate, Han Jie may be officially working as Lao Ai's right hand man but has been bribed by Lu Buwei a long time ago.

Additionally, his fidelity to Lu Buwei is not all-embracing. At the very least, he has been hiding his relationship with Feng Fei from this traitor.

How would Han Jie resettle Feng Fei in Xianyang without leaking her presence? He probably has no idea too.

Once a man and a woman are romantically involved, the complication between them are unfathomable and a clean break is often more tedious than it looks. His own relationship with Zhao Ya is a shining example.

Tomorrow is the day of the birthday banquet as well as the first performance. The courtyards are remarkably tranquil and the days of rehearsals have come to an end.

Despite being weighed down by several issues, Xiang Shaolong has to act casual and even engaged Fei Chun, Lei Yun'er and other friendly family warriors in idle chatter. From them, he learnt that Feng Fei had personally disbursed a generous amount of money to each of them as troupe disbandment benefits. However, the majority of them would stay behind and continue to support Dong Shuzen, who is considered more accommodating and approachable than Feng Fei.

Among the courtesans, only Xinyue has chosen to retire back to her hometown. Yunniang has not made up her mind and she is probably waiting for Xiao Yuetan's input.

One of them even hinted at the possibility of throwing their lot in with Xiang Shaolong but was flatly declined by him.

He can barely protect himself and does not wish for others to risk their lives with him. In addition, he would not want to weaken the protective forces of the Song & Dance Troupe. They may be powerless when it comes to behemoths like Zongsun Long but dealing with common thieves and robbers is a piece of cake to them.

Out of the blue, he received news that Zongsun Xuanhua is here and is asking for him. Xiang Shaolong was mentally prepared for this visit. As anticipated, upon meeting him at the main hall, Zongsun Xuanhua started the conversation off with some unimportant topics, such as Second Prince expressing his admiration for him, etc. Eventually, he proposed: "We have already prepared a top quality sailboat for Great General. Two nights later, we would fetch Great General at Qixia College and set sail immediately. Would Mistress be leaving with Great General or would she stay behind and leave after the Qixia College performance?"

Feigning a troubled look, Xiang Shaolong groaned: "This is the source of my agony now. She insisted on leaving only after the successful conclusion of both performances. Without her, how can I leave with a peace of mind?"

Zongsun Xuanhua appears to have gotten wind from Han Jie, knowing that Feng Fei is leaving with Xiang Shaolong on the same night after the duel. He could not conceal his astonishment and exclaimed: "Haven't the two of you come to an agreement?"

Xiang Shaolong is intentionally wedging a rift between him and Han Jie, sighing: "It was decided some time ago but she somehow changed her mind today. Hng. Does she think she can deceive me? On one hand, she is cozying up to me but on the other hand, she is seeing someone else. She may have her own spies but so do I."

Zongsun Xuanhua apparently is still ignorant about the relationship between Han Jie and Feng Fei. Hearing Xiang Shaolong's words, his face turned pale and he probed: "Who is her lover?"

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong apologized: "This is Mistress's private affairs; pardon me for not being able to reveal him. Nonetheless, it is only a few days delay. I will leave after the Qixia College performance!"

Zongsun Xuanhua instantly freaked out and worriedly questioned: "Lu Buwei has decided to return home the next morning after Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao. Doesn't Great General wish to leave before him?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is still trying his luck and testing himself. He reacted with bewilderment: "What's the hurry? Moreover, I have dispatched a messenger to Xianyang, updating Crown Prince about my situation. I also told him that wherever I am killed, the State which owns the territory would surely be involved and implored him to take revenge for me. I do not believe Lu Buwei or Tian Dan would come personally for me. What they would do is instigate others to become their sacrificial lambs." He then coldly

grunted: "My Wu Family is packed with experts; whoever that wishes harm upon me had better be prepared to live as a fugitive for the rest of his life. Brother Xuanhua can put your mind at ease."

With a guilty conscience, how can Zongsun Xuanhua maintain his calmness? Taking in those words, his face became drained of colour and he was dumbfounded.

Li Yuan and the others would not dare to openly assault Xiang Shaolong too. Like Lu Buwei, they are instigating Zongsun Long father and son to be their scapegoats.

Since the battle of Handan's Wu Family Fortress, the fame of Wu Family Warriors has spread near and far.

If Zongsun Long father and son were exposed to be the perpetrators behind Xiang Shaolong's assassination, they would face punishment from the royal family of Qi. Furthermore, they can forget about having a good meal or a good night's sleep with the assassins of the Wu Family seeking revenge on them.

Xiang Shaolong would not let up the pressure on Zongsun Xuanhua. He analyzed: "If I were Lu Buwei, I would get idiots like Ma Chenjia to try and kill me. Once completed, I would purposely leak the information to the public. When that happens, Qin will officially demand Qi for Ma Chenjia's head. What do you think the King of Qi would do?"

Zongsun Xuanhua cannot help but shuddered once, realizing: "This is truly a devious scheme of Killing with a borrowed knife."

Xiang Shaolong was amused, knowing that he has finally seen through Lu Buwei's façade of abandoning Tian Dan. It is actually Killing two birds with one stone. Firstly, get the father and son to kill Xiang Shaolong and secondly, using their crime to get rid of this father and son.

Using this example, they should know that if something were to really go wrong, Li Yuan and the others would push all the blame to them too.

Zongsun Long is not a fool, otherwise, he could not have amassed his present wealth and status. Due to his oversight that Yingzheng and Xiang Shaolong are in trouble, he has lost sight of his main goal and fell into this dilemma.

As Xiang Shaolong has heard of their disloyalty and even eavesdropped on their secret meeting last night, he was able to enlighten Zongsun Xuanhua that he has been used by Lu Buwei, Li Yuan and company, and even Han Jie in just a few sentences.

Zongsun Xuanhua is in a hurry to discuss these developments with his father and is not interested to carry on the conversation. With a panicky expression, he hastily scampered away.

Lifting his arms and stretching his back, Xiang Shaolong went in search of Feng Fei

Unless his guess is off the mark, Zongsun Xuanhua would definitely interrogate Han Jie, who will in turn press Feng Fei for details.

Since Lu Buwei is leaving in three days time, Han Jie has to leave too. Regardless of whether it is for himself or for Lu Buwei, he would not allow Zongsun Long to obtain Feng Fei.

But because of all these transitions, Xiang Shaolong knows that even if Zongsun Long is ten times more courageous, he would not dare to lay a finger on Feng Fei.

If Zongsun Long were to act against the interests of Xiang Shaolong, Feng Fei will become his incriminating evidence. It would seem logical that Zongsun Long is getting rid of Xiang Shaolong because of Feng Fei.

Out of the blue, light has appeared at the end of the tunnel.

Li Yuan and the others have deceived him thoroughly. He is now turning the tables and giving them a taste of their own medicine.

Feng Fei appears to have given up Han Jie entirely, obediently following each and every one of Xiang Shaolong's instructions. Their coordination was incredible. It was only when Xiao Yuetan came to look for him did Xiang Shaolong finally left the main building. In the side hall of the front courtyard, he detailed yesterday's and this morning's events to Xiao Yuetan.

Slapping his thigh, Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Xiang Shaolong is indeed Xiang Shaolong. With a small mistake by the adversaries, you are able to grasp the initiative. Zongsun Xuanhua is still inexperienced and bared his soul with just a few words from you." Pausing, he stared at Xiang Shaolong,

quizzing: "Shouldn't Shaolong be worried that Lu Buwei may locate that couple who raised Yingzheng?"

Xiang Shaolong could recognize Xiao Yuetan's doubts about Xiao Pan too. However, besides Wu Tingfang and Teng Yi, even Ji Yanran who is so close to him has no idea about it. Indeed, this is a secret that mustn't be shared, and even Xiao Yuetan is of no exception. Putting on a frank expression, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly replied: "So what if he locates them? Unless Lu Buwei has bribed them to fabricate charges, there is nothing to be worried about."

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: "Actually, Elder Brother has always wanted to ask you this question. Among the letters that Manager Tu (Xian) writes to me, he did mentioned that you ganged up with the senior veterans of Qin Military to conduct a blood test for Lu Buwei and Crown Prince. After proving that they are not related, the Crown Prince and yourself are able to obtain the full support of these veterans in suppressing Lu Buwei. My question is, why is Shaolong so confident that Crown Prince is not the son of Lu Buwei?"

That was the same question that Tu Xian posed years ago and what Xiang Shaolong dreaded answering. Sighing with a breath, he confessed: "I did asked Zhu Ji the exact question face to face but even she herself is unsure who is the father. That means the chances are fifty-fifty that it is Traitor Lu's son. Given the circumstances, if I were to reject Lu Gong's recommendation, it would mean the loss of support from these Qin veterans. Therefore, I decided to stake everything in the gamble. Luckily, it was the right bet."

Xiao Yuetan nodded in agreement: "With one-to-one odds, the gamble is worth it. Nevertheless, your present scenario is not very optimistic. Although Zongsun Long has been startled by you and would never become a murder weapon for somebody else, you still cannot rely on him." Pausing, he added: "It is truly a blessing that nobody has discovered the relationship between the two of us; everyone simply regards me as a connoisseur of Feng Fei's music. The only viable plan now is for you, Shaolong, to leave first. If you can successfully escape, Feng Fei and the others would be safe!"

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Feng Fei and the others can come under the joint protection of Shan Rou and Lord Longyang. If the King of Qi is planning to announce Tian Jian as the new Crown Prince at the birthday banquet tomorrow night, Xie Ziyuan's status would be greatly elevated and Zongsun Long father and son would be doing their best to get into his good books. Simultaneously, Tian Dan would have to take additional precautions against him.

Li Yuan and the others would probably chip in to protect Feng Fei and company, granting Xiang Shaolong this favour. After all, maintaining a friendship is better than creating an enemy. If the Zhengguo Canal scandal is exposed, Han Chuang's great merit would instantaneously become his great disaster. As a result, it is crucial for him to return safely to Xianyang.

The ever-conniving Xiao Yuetan reminded: "This fella Han Jie is not a simple man. Born into the royal family of Han, he became a top disciple of Cao Cuidao. Appearing to be

working for Lao Ai, he maintains a close relationship with Lu Buwei. Because of Feng Fei, he may become insanely jealous and undertake some risks. For example, he could gather the outraged swordsmen of Qixia and ambush you. This is something you must guard against.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “After fighting off Cao Cuidao, I intend to run away as far as possible. It is wonderful that Qixia College is based outside the city, making it rather convenient for me.”

Visualizing the snow skis he needed to make his getaway, Xiang Shaolong suppressed his voice: “Time is not on our side. Can Brother Xiao get his hands on a piece of premium wood for me? I need to construct a pair of snow travelling equipment. When the time comes, you can bury it alongside some food provisions at a place near Qixia College, allowing me to make a swift escape upon retrieving them.”

Xiao Yuetan himself is an expert craftsman. Astounded at his requests, he pressed Xiang Shaolong for the details of the snow ski. When Xiang Shaolong finished sketching the snow ski and snowboard, he was so taken aback that he was gaping for some time before exhaling with amazement: “How did you ever think of something like that? This happens to be the theory behind snow sleds. Leave this to me. Elder Brother will start looking for the raw materials and manufacturing your snow skis immediately. I guarantee that it would be much more ergonomic than your design and they will be completed by the allotted time.”

Xiao Yuetan had barely left Tingsong Villa when Xie Ziyuan came a knocking. He exclaimed with enthusiasm: "If Great General is available, why don't we take part in the festivities and watch Soft Boned Beauty rehearse Little Brother's song and dance composition!"

Xiang Shaolong is initially uninterested but recollected that it is a critical strategy to give others a false impression. By behaving leisurely and occupying himself with performances, it further strengthens the notion that he has nothing to fear and nothing worthwhile for Lu Buwei to expose.

Pretending to be elated, he accompanied Xie Ziyuan out of the Villa.

CHAPTER 6

Separating Gratitude And Enmity

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

ABOARD Xie Ziyuan's carriage and listening to his light-hearted whistling, Xiang Shaolong can realign his focus and reflect on the activities over the past few days.

When he first ran into Li Yuan at Zongsun Residence, Li Yuan is likely a well-meaning friend without any malicious intentions. When he could not bear it any longer and started communicating with Han Chuang, it eventually gave rise to the idea of getting rid of Xiang Shaolong, a potentially huge

threat to their States. How Guo Kai came into the picture is anyone's guess.

They are aware that Xiang Shaolong has a special place in Lord Longyang's heart. Moreover, he had expressed regret at betraying Xiang Shaolong in the past. Therefore, they chose to keep Lord Longyang in the dark about this affair.

Lord Longyang only happened to run into him when he was actually looking for Feng Fei.

When Han Chuang visited him for the first time and learnt about his plans to steal his sabre from Cao Cuidao's Qixia College, he probably hasn't made up his mind to get rid of him or not.

But when Han Chuang mentioned this to Li Yuan or Guo Kai, it inspired them to make use of Cao Cuidao to kill him. When Cao Cuidao is unable to take his life, Han Chuang knows that he has become the main suspect. He chose to avoid Xiang Shaolong while sending Li Yuan to make enquiries.

Li Yuan is truly clever, intentionally revealing Han Chuang and Guo Kai's partnership and earning Xiang Shaolong's trust. And he himself is silly enough to divulge Lord Longyang's plans to secretly whisk him away.

Lord Longyang is probably conscious that Li Yuan and the others are going to make things difficult for him but is unable to prove it, explaining why he is abandoning everything and leaving Lin Zi with him.

Instead, it was Xiang Shaolong who went back on his word and rejected his kind intention.

If not for him spying on their secret meeting yesterday, this chain of events would probably remain a mystery to him.

Surprisingly, he was feeling hurt but without a shred of hatred.

Because he understands that everyone is forced by circumstances.

At this point, Xie Ziyuan quizzed: "Are you acquainted with Xu Shang? He is originally from Shangcai and is very talented."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Xu Shang had accompanied Lu Buwei to Qi. As they have not met each other here, he has clearly forgotten about him. He nodded his head to acknowledge their acquaintance.

Xie Ziyuan updated: "Presently, Qi Yu and him are locking horns over Lan Gongyuan. Lu Buwei appears to be rather lenient towards Xu Shang."

Xiang Shaolong pondered: "If my guess is correct, Lan Gongyuan must have started dating Xu Shang back in Xianyang years ago. Hey, are you aware that Lan Gongyuan once disguised herself as a serving maid and tried to assassinate me?"

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck: "Is that so? However, she did undergo special training and her skills are pretty remarkable."

Xiang Shaolong might as well tell him the whole story. Once completed, Xie Ziyuan concluded with a serious expression: "That circus you are talking about must be Bian Dongshan's Dongzhou Circus. All along, they have been touring and performing at the various States but suddenly, they simply vanished without any news. It looks like the circus members were completely annihilated at Xianyang."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Who is Bian Dongshan?"

Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Among the top four disciples of Cao Cuidao, Bian Dongshan is the best, followed by Zongsun Xuanhua, Han Jie and wifey. Bian Dongshan's forte lies in his agility and parkour skills, and he is a first-rated assassin. He often carries out assignments for Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "He must have lost his life at Xianyang."

Xie Ziyuan shook his head, advising: "A few months ago, I heard Zongsun Xuanhua saying that he has just met him. According to hearsay, he had travelled to the Capital of Yan to assassinate a Yan General. The people of Yan trembles with fear at the mention of his name. Great General may be highly skilled but an assassin's methods are often undetectable. Great General must not be complacent."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "If he wishes to assassinate me, this is the best opportunity."

Xie Ziyuan officially remarked: "On the contrary, while you are here, Great General can put your mind at ease. Bian Dongshan is fiercely loyal to Great Qi and would never do

anything that will put Great King in a difficult position. However, it would be a different story if you leave the territory of Qi. The people of Yan nicknamed Bian Dongshan as The Assassin with a Hundred Faces. His art of disguise is unfathomable and unsurpassed. One cannot predict his next appearance or new identity.”

For the time being, Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered with Bian Dongshan. Recalling Zhang Quan’s theft of the song sheet, he shared the story with Xie Ziyuan too. He added that Feng Fei has composed a new song and even if Lan Gongyuan chooses to perform the stolen song, it would not affect Feng Fei.

Xie Ziyuan was infuriated: “It must be Qi Yu masterminding the theft. He tried to woo Feng Fei in the past but was rejected by her. Thus, he hates her to the core. I will take care of this. I, Xie Ziyuan, would not condone these shameless acts by Yuan Yuan.”

The carriage is now entering Jade Orchid Brothel. At this time of the day, the brothel is not open for business yet and the gigantic courtyards are so peaceful they seemed like an isolated world away from the rest of the city. From the rear courtyards, hints of music can be heard.

The two men got off the carriage and started walking towards the exceptionally grand Performing Hall situated at the rear courtyards.

Xie Ziyuan whispered: “In the past, when the Great King is much healthier, he loves to frequent the Performing Hall for

song and dance performances, saying that the courtesans here are much more lively. What does he expect? Courtesans who enter the palace may never get to leave. Firstly, they may unknowingly offend the King and be sentenced to death. Secondly, they may be retained by the King and after one night of passion, be relegated to a harem of forgotten concubines. In fact, there is no difference between the two outcomes.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: In comparison, Xiao Pan’s self control is admirable.

Xie Ziyuan sighed: “The Great King has a dream, which is seeing the Three Famous Courtesans performing simultaneously in front of him. He has tasked us with this mission and demands for it to be accomplished at all costs. This can be considered his only dying wish, which allows him to last till today. Otherwise he would have... Hey!”

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended the intricacies behind this grand birthday celebrations. This clearly demonstrates the empty boasts of Qi as well as their culture of instant gratification.

With this laid back mindset, not only has this huge country failed to become the leader of the Eastern States, it has constantly disrupted allied talks which happens to be the only way to curb the aggressiveness of Qin.

At this juncture, a melodious tune filled the air. It was a group of courtesans singing in unison. With crystal clear

voices and fantastic beats, Xiang Shaolong was drawn into the music.

Xie Ziyuan proudly proclaimed: "This was the composition I created at the lounge that night. It can be considered one of my best works."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed: "Does that mean that the rehearsal is ending?"

Xie Ziyuan burst out laughing and crossed the ledge into the Performing Hall.

At the heart of the Performing Hall, there were nearly sixty courtesans who are waving multicoloured dance ribbons, materializing into countless formations, resembling different clutters of coloured clouds encircling an elaborately dressed Lan Gongyuan who was singing and dancing in the centre. It was a mesmerizing sight.

By now, Lan Gongyuan was singing solo.

Witnessing her soft and flexible petite frame bending to fashion all sorts of extreme and enticing dance poses, coupled with the highs and lows, pauses and stretches in the song, it felt like a performance by heavenly maidens, causing the observers to experience the sensation of entering the heaven realm where immortals reside.

Arranged at a side were a group of forty musicians who were playing music and generating a delightful ambience within the Performing Hall.

Besides Qi Yu and a gang of ten odd Qi locals whom Xiang Shaolong does not recognize, the audience comprises of Xu Shang as well.

Once the song finishes, Qi Yu and the others broke out into applause and cheers.

Abandoning the rest of the crowd, Lan Gongyuan approached Xie Ziyuan and Xiang Shaolong. Smiling like the blossoming of a flower, she cajoled: "Why took Official Xie and Great General so long to come over?"

Probably concerned about the 'Song Theft' issue that Xiang Shaolong mentioned, Xie Ziyuan apologized before pulling Lan Gongyuan aside and speaking to her in private.

Qi Yu and the others started walking towards him while the courtesans were all paying special attention to him. Whispering and giggling among themselves, they are radiating with passion.

Xu Shang greeted Xiang Shaolong with a military salute as per the laws of Qin. He added with a serious tone: "I have not had the chance to officially pay my respects to Great General; I beg Great General's pardon for my tardiness."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "This is not Xianyang; let's keep things simple."

With an apprehensive expression, Qi Yu peeped at an irate Xie Ziyuan who is speaking to Lan Gongyuan some distance away from them. With a distracted tone, he questioned Xiang Shaolong: "It has come to my attention that Great

General is a music connoisseur. How would you rate the previous song?"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that it was Zhang Quan who told him about it. Guilt-ridden, he solemnly state: "Brother Qi must be kidding. In the field of music, Little Brother is just an amateur. However, even to a music newbie like me, I find the earlier song an exciting and unparalleled composition. It is somewhat able to evoke strong emotions in me."

A well-built and young warrior standing besides Qi Yu interrupted: "My name is Min Tingzhang. I hereby pay my respects to Great General."

Realizing that he is the acclaimed swordsman of Qi who shared the same skill level as Ma Chenjia, Xiang Shaolong replied that it is his pleasure to meet him while paying extra attention in assessing him.

Compared to Ma Chenjia, Min Tingzhang is much more approachable and has a cultured look. Overall, he is pleasing to the eye.

Noticing Min Tingzhang gazing at his Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong simply untied the weapon and scabbard, handing it to him for a closer look.

The famed swordsman was caught unaware by Xiang Shaolong. After receiving it, he analyzed and toyed with it as the other curious onlookers joined him. Gushes of admiration were expressed by each and every one of them.

The three men, Qi Yu, Xu Shang and Xiang Shaolong were left standing there in silence, leading to an awkward situation.

A few of the more courageous and captivating courtesans advanced towards them, greeting and paying their respects to Xiang Shaolong. After serving him a series of meaningful glances, they giggled and sashayed away.

Fortunately, Xie Ziyuan and Lan Gongyuan happened to rejoin the group. With a wronged expression on her face, Lan Gongyuan appears to have been reprimanded by Xie Ziyuan. However, judging from her body language, she appears to be willing to bear the responsibility for this mistake.

Qi Yu winked at her enquiringly but Lan Gongyuan deliberately ignored him, seemingly venting her anger on him.

Moving to Lan Gongyuan's side, Xu Shang wondered: "Yuan Yuan, are you upset?"

Unexpectedly, Lan Gongyuan stared at Xiang Shaolong, checking: "Yuan Yuan has yet to pay my respects to First Mistress. Is Great General going directly back to Tingsong Villa?"

Except for Xie Ziyuan, the others were flabbergasted.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Xie Ziyuan have such a big influence over Lan Gongyuan. He nodded with a smile.

Lan Gongyuan questioned: "Can we leave immediately?"

Unable to comprehend the situation, Qi Yu and the others are baffled.

Overhearing their exchange, Min Tingzhang returned Hundred Battle Sabre to Xiang Shaolong with both hands, praising: "I heard this unique weapon is personally designed by Great General. It is truly a masterpiece and an eye-opening experience for us."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has won the respect of this usually arrogant swordsman due to his one sabre stroke victory over Ma Chenjia. After giving a modest reply and getting ready to leave for Tingsong Villa with Xie Ziyuan and Lan Gongyuan, Min Tingzhang abruptly invited: "Tomorrow is Qixia College's monthly Sword Meet. Would Great General honour us with your presence and give us, your juniors, some pointers?"

With a look of distress, Xiang Shaolong sincerely replied: "To be honest, meeting Grandmaster Cao under such circumstances is rather awkward."

Another man cheerfully exclaimed: "For the past ten years, Grandmaster Cao has been absent from the Sword Meet; Great General can put your mind at ease."

Unwilling to increase his commitments, Xiang Shaolong gave a superficial answer: "Let's talk about it tomorrow!" Feeling curious, he probed: "Isn't the Sword Meet held on the 1st? Why has it been postponed?"

Qi Yu explained: "It was postponed due to the Great King's birthday celebration. However, this Meet would be even

more majestic than usual. Great General must remember to come!”

Someone promptly informed him about the time and place of the Sword Meet.

Not thinking very much of it, Xiang Shaolong followed Lan Gongyuan and Xie Ziyuan out of the hall as Qi Yu and Xu Shang stared at him with jealousy.

Upon reaching the main courtyard, Xie Ziyuan indicated his desire to return to his workplace and cannot accompany them further. Leaving his carriage behind for them, he rode off on a horse.

Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate that he would be left alone with this Soft Boned Beauty. Raising his alertness, he suggested: “Miss Yuan can take the carriage. I will ride a horse.”

Shooting him a glare, Lan Gongyuan plainly state: “It has been some time since I rode a horse. Let’s give these horses some exercise for their legs.”

Yao Sheng and the others hurriedly gave up two good horses. Despite her elaborate costume, Lan Gongyuan nimbly flipped onto the horse like a fox, earning cheers from everyone.

Putting a leg over the back of the horse, Xiang Shaolong and Lan Gongyuan rode side by side out of Jade Orchid Brothel, instantly attracting the attention of everyone on the streets.

Yao Sheng sent four riders ahead to pave the way and divided the remaining riders to the two sides and the back, creating an awe-inspiring sight.

Riding closer to Xiang Shaolong, Lan Gongyuan teased: "Is Great General feeling uncomfortable? Despite all your attempts, you still end up riding and talking with me."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: A criminal reporting a crime. He beamed: "I have not forgotten that Miss Yuan once tried to take my life!"

After a short silence, Lan Gongyuan lightly described: "In this world, there are three persons Yuan Yuan is indebted to. Is Great General interested to know who they are?"

Xiang Shaolong conjectured: "The first one should be easy. Is it Official Xie?"

Lan Gongyuan was elated: "Talking to you is certainly easy, saving me the long explanations. Try and guess the second person. He perished under the hands of Great General."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "No wonder you came to kill me."

Lan Gongyuan nonchalantly disclosed: "Great General is such a lousy guesser! That person is Xiao Weimou. Yuan Yuan can be who I am today is all because he gave me to a man surnamed Bian who raised and trained me. If not, I would probably have starved to death on the streets."

Xiao Weimou was actually beaten to death by Teng Yi but he obviously would not mention it. Inspired, he asked: "Is it Bian Dongshan? Now I know why you possess such

remarkable skills. He should be the third person you are indebted to!"

Beyond his expectation, Lan Gongyuan gnashed her teeth and cringed: "It is the exact opposite. He is the person I hated the most. I never want to remember the disgusting things he did to me."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Aren't you working with him during the Xianyang Mission?"

Lan Gongyuan simply articulated: "That is a pure business deal. As long as I act according to plan, regardless of success or failure, I would have nothing to do with Bian Dongshan anymore. Besides that, I am doing it to repay Xiao Weimou's debt of gratitude. We do not owe each other anything anymore."

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air: "It is true that everyone has a complicated story behind them. But the risk you took was too great. Hey, I never thought that Xiao Weimou could perform good deeds."

Lan Gongyuan dismissed with contempt: "Both he and Bian Dongshan are only attracted by my good looks. Their morals are non-existent. Let's not talk about them! Can Great General guess who is the third person?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, surrendering: "I cannot even guess Xiao Weimou. The third person would be even more difficult to guess. However, I probably knew this person, right? Could it be Tian Dan, or maybe Lu Buwei?"

Lan Gongyuan kept shaking her head and is grinning happily like a little girl. She concluded: "The guesses are incorrect."

Xiang Shaolong is starting to find this Soft Boned Beauty quite an interesting character. He admitted defeat: "I give up!"

Covering her mouth as she giggled, Lan Gongyuan announced: "It's Xiang Shaolong!" Xiang Shaolong shouted with disbelief: "What?"

All along, they have been suppressing their voices to keep the conversation solely between the two of them. With his abrupt outcry, Yao Sheng and the others turned towards them and stared with astonishment.

Lan Gongyuan gratefully articulated: "There is nothing illogical about it. It is really you. From the time of my assassination attempt until my successful departure from Xianyang the very same night, I was mentally prepared to be captured and executed by you. However, you chose to let me off. How can Lan Gongyuan not be indebted to you? Back then, Lu Buwei also mentioned that the City Guards are all under your command and even he is unable to protect me."

Dazed for some time, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "You need not feel indebted to me. Putting things in perspective, you are just a pawn who is being used by somebody else to kill me. Executing you does not make any sense to me."

Lan Gongyuan solemnly declared: "Xiang Shaolong is truly Xiang Shaolong. Chancellor Tian and General Dan may view

you as their enemy but they are full of respect for Great General's integrity. On the contrary, they are full of contempt for Lu Buwei's character."

Feeling his emotions stirring, Xiang Shaolong lamented: "Integrity is useless. Presently, who is not chasing after personal benefits? As long as I pose a threat to their welfare, people are using all sorts of despicable methods to get rid of me."

With a 'Pu Ci', Lan Gongyuan cackled: "It is not often that Great General speaks with this tone. I can tell that your opinion of Yuan Yuan has improved. Using a visit to Feng Fei as an excuse, I was actually creating an opportunity to speak with you privately. Great General must safeguard yourself against this bunch of Zongsun Family Warriors. They are originally a gang of ruffians and outlaws, specializing in collecting bad debts for Zongsun Long. Quite a number of my gambling addict sisters have suffered immensely at their hands. If you don't believe me, just take a closer look at them. Every one of them is focusing their ears on eavesdropping our secret conversation."

She purposely finished the last two sentences with an increase in volume, startling Yao Sheng and the others who automatically increase the distance between themselves and the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but experience her prowess.

The Three Famous Courtesans have their own unique points. Among them, Lan Gongyuan's mannerism is considered the

most unbecoming. It could be due to her unhappy childhood, giving rise to a certain style of self-degrading behavior. Although she treats men like playthings, in her heart, she can differentiate between gratitude and enmity, earning Xiang Shaolong's respect.

Resembling the tingling of bells, Lan Gongyuan giggled non-stop. As she attracted more eyeballs to her, she rode closer to Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "Does Great General despise Yuan Yuan for dating Qi Yu and other loathsome scoundrels? Aye. How many good men are there in this world? At least Qi Yu is rather handsome and is an excellent sweet talker. Regarding the song theft, I was innocent. Qi Yu even lied to me, saying that it was his own creation."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "That's the Lan Gongyuan I know!"

With Tingsong Villa in sight, Lan Gongyuan lightly advised: "Great General must not let down your guard against Shi Sufang. She used to be on good terms with Pu Hu and may classify you as an enemy!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I have room for more!"

Receiving Lan Gongyuan in the front hall, Feng Fei appeared to be friendly and approachable. If she is still upset with Lan Gongyuan over the stolen music score, there was no sign of it on her face.

As both ladies scrutinized each other, Xiang Shaolong is having an eyeful as well. As Lan Gongyuan is dressed in her elaborate performing costume while Feng Fei has also put

on a nice outfit, he is able to draw comparisons between their beauty.

Despite the insignificant gap in their age, not only does Lan Gongyuan appear younger looking but in front of the cultured Feng Fei who is of noble birth, she resembles a juvenile delinquent.

Xiang Shaolong is probably having this impression because Lan Gongyuan is here to apologise to Feng Fei. Despite her wrongful conviction, Lan Gongyuan was behaving in a modest and subservient manner, further earning his admiration.

Lan Gongyuan apologized: "Greetings to Senior Sister. Yuan Yuan is specially here today to ask for your forgiveness about the song theft. Yuan Yuan will have it destroyed later..."

Before she could go on, Feng Fei put up a hand to halt her conversation. She exhaled: "What's done cannot be undone. But today is a day of forgiveness. Now that Junior Sister has seen the folly of your ways, Feng Fei is more than satisfied. The birthday celebration will be Feng Fei's final show. With this work-related issue reaching a happy conclusion, there are no more regrets in Feng Fei's heart."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own emotions stirring. From an insider's perspective, it is amazing that Feng Fei has yet to suffer a nervous breakdown. Going to Xianyang must be the worst decision of her life. She must have met Han Jie during one of the official banquets and was smitten by his handsome looks and intellectual thoughts. Moreover, he is a

royal descendant just like herself. Back in the earlier days, Lao Ai and Han Jie were plagiarizing the ladies of Han, therefore, their sweet talking skills and understanding of women psychology must be one of the best. If Feng Fei, Shi Sufang and Lan Gongyuan are the Three Famous Courtesans; Qi Yu, Lao Ai and Han Jie can be considered the Three Famous Playboys.

In Xianyang, an emotional Feng Fei made two life-changing decisions: fall in love with Han Jie and disbanding the Song & Dance Troupe. Currently, not only has she lost her affections for Han Jie, she will become a forgotten celebrity without her Song & Dance Troupe. The only positive outcome is that she no longer has to deal with lustful men trying to obtain her body. In addition, her fortune should be sufficient for a life of luxury.

Lan Gongyuan was touched: "Senior Sister is truly fortunate to go out with a bang. Yuan Yuan is full of admiration for Senior Sister's song composition skill and the courage to move on at the peak of your career. What are Sister's future plans?"

Glaring at Xiang Shaolong once, Feng Fei replied: "I intend to retire at a secluded and peaceful place. Great General is making the necessary arrangements."

She added: "Among the three of us, I heard Junior Sister has the most tormenting childhood. For Junior Sister to accomplish so much despite life dealing you a set of bad cards, Feng Fei has nothing but respect for you."

Not anticipating this comment from Feng Fei, Lan Gongyuan flinched. She professed: "Yuan Yuan has learnt that only you can give up on yourself. If you can make it past today, tomorrow would definitely be better. It is Yuan Yuan's good fortune to meet Senior Sister and Great General today. Yuan Yuan has to go, as Jade Orchid Brothel is opening for business soon."

With that, she mounted the same horse and left.

CHAPTER 7

Qixia Sword Meet

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER Lan Gongyuan departed, Feng Fei interrogated with disdain: “I heard she sleeps around. Is Great General interested in this kind of women?”

Xiang Shaolong is walking her back to the main building. Taking in her words, he retorted: “Since when did I express any interest in her? How is Shuzen doing?”

Feng Fei proudly proclaimed: “With Feng Fei personally instructing her, how bad can she turn out? Don’t change the topic. How did you get involved with her?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Can you not use the words: get involved? It is so demeaning! Little Brother and her are just platonic friends. She said she wanted to visit you and ask for your forgiveness; can I say no to that? Look at yourself. Earlier, you are so sweet and accommodating towards her, as if she is your own sister. The minute she left, you began criticizing her and portraying her as somebody without any good attributes."

Covering her mouth as she giggled, Feng Fei warned: "This is how a jealous woman looks like. Since you chose to ignore me, I would not allow you to pay any attention to other women. Otherwise, you'll get it from me."

By now they have arrived at the stairs of the main building. Xiang Shaolong was about to leave when Feng Fei held onto his sleeve and dragged him into the building. Turning around, she threw herself into his arms, whispering: "Is Great General thinking of leaving Feng Fei behind and leaving by himself?"

Although Xiang Shaolong is embracing a fragrant and enticing body, his mind is brimming with bitterness. He did planned to make use of the snowboard and slip away first while getting someone to take care of Feng Fei and the others. Unexpectedly, this peerless beauty with her matching intelligence has exposed his secret. He could not bear to lie to her but feared her overreaction should he chose to confess the truth. What should he do?

Raising her exquisite face, Feng Fei pitifully squirmed: “You need not reply. Your expression has given me the heartrending answer.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Do you know that as long as I am alive, no one would dare to lay a finger on you.”

Feng Fei quizzed: “Didn’t you mention that Zongsun Long will protect us?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “The problem lies with your ex lover and his close relationship with the Zongsun Family. I just received news that due to Han Jie’s facilitation, Lu Buwei and Zongsun Long had a two-hour secret discussion. What do you think they are planning to do?”

Momentarily stunned, Feng Fei melancholically replied: “Since this is the case, why are you still abandoning me?”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong mused: “Why don’t you leave one day before me. I will meet up with you after that. Lord Longyang should be able to make the necessary preparations.”

Hugging him with all her strength, Feng Fei grieved: “Before knowing the result of the duel, how can Feng Fei leave Lin Zi? Fine! Do whatever you want with me. Feng Fei will leave my fate in your hands.”

Xiang Shaolong can fully comprehend her helpless feelings of being alone and deserted. Based on her beauty and talent, all the men in the world would be won over by her. Maybe Heaven is jealous of her accomplishments, letting her fall in

love with a scoundrel and crossing paths with himself who is unwilling to fall in love with her, eventually breaking her heart into pieces.

Comforting her to the best of his abilities, Xiang Shaolong finally left for his own room after Feng Fei has recomposed herself. He had barely rested when Zongsun Xuanhua came to look for him.

Seating themselves in the Eastern Chamber, Zongsun Xuanhua started: "Does Great General know that Lu Buwei paid us a visit?"

Xiang Shaolong deduced that he has held a discussion with his father and advisors, deciding that Lu Buwei cannot be trusted and is trying to salvage the situation with him. He naturally would not bring Guo Kai, Li Yuan or the others into the picture.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Even if I did not see it personally, I could easily imagine it. What other new tricks can Lu Buwei come up with? Moreover, Han Jie is your martial brother. Oh yes! What is the relationship between the two of you?"

Faced with Xiang Shaolong's abrupt interrogation about his Achilles' heel, Zongsun Xuanhua freaked out on the spot. He stammered: "Our relationship is not clearly defined but we are definitely acquainted."

Xiang Shaolong openly declared: "Compared to Lu Buwei, Han Jie should be more eager to kill me. This is because Lu Buwei assumes that he has a trump card that would cause my complete downfall. Han Jie should be insanely jealous of

me and an insane man would act without thinking twice about the consequences.”

Zongsun Xuanhua is no fool and he already guessed that Feng Fei’s lover is Han Jie; otherwise, why would he be so familiar with Feng Fei’s activities? His face losing colour, he lowered his head to conceal it. As he stared at the floor, he probed with a deep voice: “Has Great General decided on your departure date?”

Xiang Shaolong is highly amused, knowing that through his intricate scheming, he has caused both father and son to lose their bearings. He somberly remarked: “After careful consideration, I would officially bid farewell to your Great King and Second Prince. At the same time, I would request for soldiers to protect me and openly parade back to Qin. It is way better than sneaking around and becoming a lightning rod for rumours.”

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Xuanhua fully agrees. Great General can seek Official Xie’s assistance in relaying the message. I guarantee that everything will be well-arranged.”

With these sentences, Xiang Shaolong knows that Zongsun Long father and son would not dare to participate in any more anti-Xiang Shaolong schemes after weighing the pros and cons.

If Xiang Shaolong is sent home by Qi’s official escort, both Li Yuan’s team and Lu Buwei’s team would lack the grounds to instigate Zongsun Long father and son to assassinate him.

Nevertheless, this is not an ideal outcome. The King of Qi cannot afford to dispatch an army to escort him. Moreover, there may be spies within the escort team. With these unknown factors, it would be a miracle if he can travel safely through Chu and the Three States.

The Qi escorts would not serve him wholeheartedly. If they run into trouble, they would scatter like mice.

But in Feng Fei's case, this would be an excellent arrangement. He made a mental note to approach Tian Jian about this. Hopefully, this would relieve him of this pressing issue.

Zongsun Xuanhua frowned: "Min Tingzhang came to see me earlier, saying that Great General has agreed to participate in the Sword Meet tomorrow. I have been doing my best to reject these meaningless appointments. Why did Great General give him your consent?"

Xiang Shaolong refuted: "I did not give him my consent. I only gave a perfunctory reply, saying that I will think about it!"

Zongsun Xuanhua was incensed: "This fellow is getting out of hand and even dared to overstep his boundaries. I must teach him a lesson."

Xiang Shaolong assured: "Relax! There is no reason for me to go too."

Zongsun Xuanhua swore: "Actually, there is no harm going. Whoever dares to cross Great General's path would have to

deal with me first. Xuanhua will warn all those frog-in-the-well fellows that whoever is upset with Great General, it is as good as being upset with me, Zongsun Xuanhua.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is trying to make up for his earlier mistake by flattering himself. He casually dismissed: “Let’s see what happens tomorrow!”

Zongsun Xuanhua suggested: “Tonight...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him: “It is not appropriate for me to indulge in night activities. Otherwise, I would lack the vitality to deal with Grandmaster Cao’s saintly sword.”

Zongsun Xuanhua can detect that Xiang Shaolong is no longer as friendly and trusting as before, recognizing that Lu Buwei’s issue has cast a shadow over their relationship. Stuck without a choice, he left dejectedly.

After carefully studying his options, Xiang Shaolong sent a messenger to invite Xie Ziyuan over. He went straight to the point: “Little Brother has something that requires Brother Xie’s assistance.”

Xie Ziyuan was overjoyed: “You can count on me. Brother Xiang can speak without reservations.”

Xiang Shaolong honestly explained the whole scenario, as he is concerned that any misunderstandings would result in unnecessary troubles. The only thing he held back was Zongsun Long father and son ganging up with Li Yuan and company. He only hinted that the people of Chu and the

Three States are not reliable, for they are secretly planning to increase the hostility between Qin and Qi.

Exhaling a breath of cold air at the end of his lecture, Xie Ziyuan was disappointed: “Doesn’t Zongsun Long understand the intentions of the Great King and Second Prince? Even a fool can tell that Lu Buwei would have a terrible ending.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “On the surface, you must pretend that everything is normal. Privately, please inform Second Prince that I may leave without saying goodbye and beseech him to take care of Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the others.”

Patting his chest, Xie Ziyuan agreed: “You can count on Little Brother. After Brother Xiang’s departure, I will advise Second Prince to offer them temporary residence within the palace. Once everything has died down, I would send them over to Xianyang.”

His face revealing an expression of reluctance, Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Without Brother Xiang, life would be less exciting.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Are you afraid that you cannot fool around anymore?”

His face turning red, Xie Ziyuan prayed: “Wifey is much more lenient with Little Brother now. It would be wonderful if she can maintain this attitude even after the departure of Brother Xiang.”

Several jokes and conversations later, Xie Ziyuan took his leave.

Next, Xiang Shaolong looked for Dong Shuzen. After giving her the necessary instructions, the eyes of Dong Shuzen began to turn red. In a flustered tone, she wailed: "Right now, we are so worried about your duel with Cao Cuidao two nights later."

Xiang Shaolong can understand where she is coming from, as he seems to be reading out his will through the instructions that he gave her. By planning all their future activities, it sounded inauspicious. Luckily, he is confident that he would survive the duel with Cao Cuidao. With a smile, he consoled her: "Everyone would have to face different challenges in life. Your top priority is to train hard for your performances. In the future, you must come to Xianyang and perform for me."

A grateful Dong Shuzen leapt into his bosom.

Embracing her alluring body, this is the first time Xiang Shaolong could feel the absence of all sexual connotations. What he felt instead was an awesome borderless friendship that surpasses the kind of love between a man and a woman. Due to his past restraints, he was rewarded with this mind-blowing sensation.

Within his heart, an immense fighting spirit began to stir. For his loved ones and for himself, he would fight till the end, never giving up and never surrendering.

That night, everyone from the Song & Dance Troupe gathered in the main hall for a pre-celebration. Regardless of their status, every person is exhibiting their support and

enthusiasm for the Troupe, unlike the fearful and selfish behavior that was witnessed earlier.

During the banquet, Xiang Shaolong officially announced that he would be inviting the Dong Shuzen-inherited Song & Dance Troupe to Xianyang for a performance. All expenses will be borne by his Wu Family, much to the delight of the crowd.

Although Feng Fei is no longer actively involved, she was enjoying herself too.

With Xiang Shaolong's support, it is the equivalent of providing the Song & Dance Troupe with a reliable backer. This is highly beneficial for the standing of the Troupe. The only shadow looming over the celebration is Xiang Shaolong's duel with Cao Cuidao two days later. Of course nobody dares to mention this.

Many people are wasted that night, including Feng Fei.

Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, did not touch a single drop of wine. After carrying Feng Fei back to her room, he went to the rear garden all by himself to practice his Sabre skills.

He can feel his cultivation of the sabre improving by leaps and bounds.

This was forced by Cao Cuidao.

After exchanging blows with this earth-shattering grandmaster swordsman, he caught a glimpse of an unimaginable level of martial arts that he never thought

existed. With the mind and the sword combined as one united force, the pressure radiating from this stance is several times more powerful than one who is fighting with ferocity or kamikaze adrenaline.

In the past, Xiang Shaolong is able to overcome other swordsmen mainly because of his deep knowledge of Mozi Swordplay Meditation, on top of his physical health and innate strength. During the duel, he is able to maintain absolute calmness and display the essence of the swordplay.

Cao Cuidao has unknowingly aroused his willpower, confidence and an indescribable type of mental and physical strength combination. This newfound aura is critical to one's victory in battle.

That night, he meditated for an hour before retiring to bed. Sleeping all the way till dawn, he woke up fully rejuvenated and felt so powerful that he can kill a tiger with his bare hands. Proceeding to the garden, he did some warm up exercises before starting to practice his sabre once again.

Recalling that day when he scored victory with one sabre stroke, causing Ma Chenjia to discard his weapon and flee, he realized that besides mastering the precision of the attack, the main reason behind his success was that he was holding the sabre with both hands. By following a samurai attacking style, the strength of his blow would increase by several folds.

He can feel a sense of excitement surging within him, thinking that this may be the only way to counter Cao Cuidao's colossal strength.

Finding the appropriate time and method to execute it is vital to its success.

With a mere ten strokes, he does not believe he cannot withstand the blows.

Even if Cao Cuidao has three heads and six arms, he would be able to counter him with his sabre and scabbard combination. Moreover, the ten strokes will be over in a flash.

Remembering the earlier days when he was depressed and despondent, lacking confidence in even handling the ten strokes, he could not help but feel amused. Deep inside, he was deeply grateful towards his good buddy Xiao Yuetan.

His earlier notions of fear and escape have disappeared without a trace.

Now that he has completed all his preparations, he looks forward to face Cao Cuidao tomorrow night with an undistracted mind. At the end of the duel, he would make use of the cover of the night to make good his escape, heading back to Xianyang to reunite with his wives and son.

With this formidable foe exerting pressure on him, Xiang Shaolong can literally feel himself unleashing his hidden potential as he practice his moves. With every strike, he can

experience himself reaching another peak in his mind. It was a surreal sensation that he had never encountered before.

Out of the blue, he felt as if he is in the centre of a massacre. As his men collapsed one by one around him, followed by Zhou Liang tragically dying in front of his eyes and King Eagle attacking the enemy to avenge its master, his mind was crammed with feelings of grief and anger.

Recalling his friends who had betrayed or abandoned him due to differences in loyalty, he came to the conclusion that while all things may change, the Hundred Battle Sabre in his hand would forever serve as a trusty companion.

He released a weak slash.

Time seemed to have stopped still.

Shan Rou's voice sounded from his back: "I'm not fighting you today! You are becoming more and more powerful."

Returning the sabre back into the scabbard, Xiang Shaolong came to Shan Rou's side, jesting: "I thought Elder Sister Rou does not know the meaning of fear?"

Shan Rou elbowed an area near his waist, causing him to cry out in pain. She cursed: "To hell with your nonsense. Outside the Villa, Min Tingzhang and the others are awaiting your esteemed arrival, ready to escort you to Qixia College to attend the Sword Meet. If not for them, I would have kicked you all the way back to Xianyang."

Rubbing the painful bruise, Xiang Shaolong pleaded: "I have to trouble you to tell them that I am planning to stay indoors today, conserving my energy..."

Shan Rou interrupted him: "You are not allowed to back out. I am all excited and looking for someone to be my punching bag. Tell you what, you can tag along with me to join the festivities."

Before Xiang Shaolong can recover from his daze, Shan Rou is dragging him so hard that he stumbled along.

More than five hundred Qixia Swordsmen are performing the opening formation named Sword Salute.

Their movements are well synchronized and neat, resulting in an awesome performance.

Xiang Shaolong is seated at the VIP seats of the college parade square. On his right is Tian Jian, followed by Lu Buwei, while Tian Dan is seated on his left. Shan Rou has somewhat disappeared into the crowds.

Each and every one of Lin Zi's rich and famous, officials, minsters and even the royal family were in full attendance. It was a grand and imposing sight.

There are plenty of warriors and commoners who are here to join in the festivities. With at least four thousand of them in attendance, they filled the four corners of the parade square to the brim.

At the end of the Sword Salute display, Tian Jian enthusiastically represented King Qixiang in reading out the

rules of the Meet. A Qixia Tutor himself, Zongsun Xuanhua led a pack of several Tutors and swordsmen into the parade square, simultaneously conducting tests for swordsmanship, riding and archery. Min Tingzhang is a Tutor too and wasted no time in showcasing his abilities.

Seated on the other side of Tian Dan is Xie Ziyuan. Skipping Tian Dan who is in between them, he winked at Xiang Shaolong, indicating the smooth execution of his requests.

Lu Buwei who was chatting with Tian Jian suddenly leaned closer and proposed: "Let me escort Shaolong to Qixia College tomorrow evening! This matter concerns the glory of our Great Qin, we must have a decent entourage."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: You can come, but I would certainly slip away and make you lose face in front of your men. Smiling in return, he could not be bothered with him.

Unexpectedly, Tian Jian overheard this exchange and interrupted: "Let me and Imperial Uncle escort Great General together, giving him a boost of courage."

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself and helplessly agreed.

On the other side, Tian Dan chortled: "By now, First Mistress should have entered the palace in preparation for tonight's performance!"

Xiang Shaolong found it hilarious, recognizing that he is trying to make small talk. Muttering a reply, he turned his attention back to the parade square. Coincidentally, a warrior

happened to hit the bull's eye on a target two hundred steps away, earning a series of wild cheers.

Compared to the ambience of Qin's Hunting Fair, the Qixia Sword Meet is much more inferior, illustrating the pathetic culture of martial arts in Qi vis a vis Qin.

At this juncture, someone came to Tian Dan's side and whispered a few sentences to him.

After the man left, Tian Dan faced Lu Buwei and chuckled: "There is a challenger who is interested in dueling Imperial Uncle's Shangcai Number One Swordsman. I wonder if Imperial Uncle is open to allowing Xu Shang to enter the ring and have some fun?"

Xiang Shaolong can smell a rat, deducing that it is Qi Yu instigating this fight, hoping to ruffle the feathers of his love rival.

After getting to know Soft Boned Beauty better, he is conscious that regardless of Qi Yu or Xu Shang, they would definitely end up with a huge disappointment if they thought that she would fall in love with them. Nonetheless, Xu Shang is an expert swordsman, almost as good as Guan Zhongxie. Even if it was Zongsun Xuanhua or Min Tingzhang taking the fight, they may not be able to overcome him.

Momentarily stunned, Lu Buwei quizzed: "With our super swordsman Great General here, why would the people of Qixia want to go for anyone else?"

Tian Jian officially replied: "My royal father has just issued a strict decree that nobody is allowed to challenge Great General before and after his duel with Grandmaster Cao. Ma Chenjia has already been punished."

Lu Buwei lightly sniggered to conceal the awkwardness and unease in his heart.

Tian Dan's face darkened, as he is partly responsible for Ma Chenjia's case.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong applauded this decision and also knew that it is Tian Jian helping him in secret. He intentionally blurted: "Maybe it is Brother Qi Yu who wants to have some fun with Commander Xu."

Realizing that Xiang Shaolong has learnt about the two men fighting over Lan Gongyuan, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan started to fidget unnaturally.

Lu Buwei was about to say something when the crowd suddenly erupted into loud cheering.

As everyone turned their attention back to the parade square, the faces of Xiang Shaolong, Tian Dan and Xie Ziyuan had a change in expression.

Shan Rou was proudly walking to the centre of the square. She shrilly called out: "It is now the beginning of our dueling event. Shan Rou wishes to seek the guidance of Tian Bang."

Tian Dan violently shuddered once, knowing that Shan Rou is banking on her husband Xie Ziyuan's rising authority, openly

bullying him and is now using his precious son as a revenge target.

Although Tian Bang's swordsmanship is above average, it cannot be compared to Shan Rou who happens to be one of Cao Cuidao's top disciples. Fighting her is as good as sending him to the slaughterhouse.

If Tian Bang were to reject her, he can forget about raising his head high up again. Moreover, his opponent is a female, exacerbating the situation.

Zongsun Xuanhua and the other senior disciples who are organizing the Sword Meet are thrown into disarray, not knowing how to resolve this kind of scenario.

Seated at the back of the grandstand, Tian Bang's face turned deathly grey.

If the challenger was an ordinary Qixia swordsman, he could send a representative. But his opponent this time happens to be the prestigious Madam Xie who asked specifically for him. By hook or by crook, he has to take her on in person.

Tian Jian guffawed: "Madam Rou is even braver than some of our men."

With this comment from him, no one would dare to voice any objection.

Tian Bang was about to stand up but Dan Chu, who was seated beside him, held him back. Standing up himself, he icily grunted: "Since Madam Rou is in such high spirits, why don't Dan Chu have a go first!"

This time round, it was Xie Ziyuan and Xiang Shaolong who flinched.

After all, Shan Rou has given birth to two kids and her physical stamina is a far cry from before. Against a master swordsman like Dan Chu, she may bear the brunt of the fight.

Left without a choice, Xiang Shaolong boisterously laughed before Shan Rou can reply: "My hands are itching too. Let Little Brother have this fight on behalf of Madam Rou!"

In a split second, the entire crowd exploded with deafening cheers, drowning out Shan Rou's protest and objection.

CHAPTER 8

Goodbye Kiss

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

DAN CHU lingered on the same spot, not exhibiting the slightest intention to enter the ring while Xiang Shaolong remained in his seat. By now, the crowds have shouted until their voices are hoarse. Witnessing this strange phenomenon, the rowdy calls gradually came to a stop and the parade square is now completely silent.

Exchanging glances with the exasperated Shan Rou who is still standing in the middle of the square, Xiang Shaolong grinned to himself.

Before he offered to take Shan Rou's place, he already knew that Dan Chu would not dare to take him on.

This risk is not worthwhile for Dan Chu. Before leading his army to war victories and obtaining Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong is already a force to be reckoned with. The present Xiang Shaolong is definitely much more formidable, causing Dan Chu to lack the confidence in winning the fight. Moreover, Cao Cuidao will personally take him on tomorrow; there is no need to risk his life now.

As anticipated, Dan Chu politely state: "The Great King has issued a strict decree, forbidding anyone to duel with Great General. Grandmaster Cao is the only exception. How can I defy the decree?"

The spectators instantly jeered with disappointment.

Seated within vicinity of Tian Jian, Zongsun Long stood up and loudly roared: "Who dares to defy Great King's decree!"

The crowd instantaneously subsided, feeling bizarre that Zongsun Long is the one showcasing his authority.

Shan Rou was pleased: "In this case, why don't General Dan show me a thing or two!"

Dan Chu glanced pleadingly at Tian Jian.

Tian Jian understood his dilemma and laughed: "Everyone in Lin Zi stands in awe of Madam Rou's swordsmanship. General Dan probably reacted in the spur of the moment. Although Great General has made his offer, the fight would be unlawful. Let's annul this duel."

These words are highly appropriate, hinting that Tian Bang is inferior to Shan Rou, preserving her prestige.

With this future King of Qi intervening, Shan Rou knows that the fight is over even before it begun. Shooting a vicious glare at Xiang Shaolong, she dejectedly returned to her seat.

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Shan Rou will not let him off. However, he is not worried at all because suffering under her fists and scolding is one of the happy events of life.

Xie Ziyuan glanced at him with gratitude in his eyes.

The Sword Meet progressed on and despite some duels, there was nothing worth cheering for the crowd. Before midday, it came to a close and nothing was further heard about Xu Shang's supposed challenge.

At Qixia College, Xiang Shaolong joined Tian Jian, Tian Dan, Lu Buwei and the others for lunch. Xiang Shaolong could not endure it any longer and used this break to question Zongsun Xuanhua: "Why didn't I see any emissaries from the other States? Didn't Brother Xuanhua invite them?"

Zongsun Xuanhua behaved as if he is very intimate with Xiang Shaolong. In a hush-hush secretive manner, he replied: "Two days ago, our Great King held a meeting with the emissaries of the other States. Due to differences in opinion, the meeting ended on a distasteful note. Today, they must have intentionally given us the cold shoulder; otherwise, the Sword Meet would be much more lively."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong was enlightened that their discussion must be concerning Qin resistance efforts. Since Qi is persisting in outdated methods of engagement, their negotiations with the other eastern States would surely end up in a deadlock.

He recalled that he himself was responsible for destroying two rounds of allied military campaigns. The first time, he employed a scheme. By releasing Wei Zhen back to his country and using him to arouse the Wei King's suspicions of Prince Xinling, he was able to deceive the King of Wei into recalling Prince Xinling from the battlefield. Left leaderless, the coalition fell apart.

The second time, he personally led an army and defeated the allied forces soundly as they were en route to Xianyang, causing them to suffer heavy losses and eventually disintegrating.

In the eyes of the five eastern States, he can be considered their greatest enemy. No wonder Li Yuan and his other old buddies are turning their cannons on him, Xiang Shaolong.

Seated besides Tian Jian, Xiang Shaolong used this opportunity to tell him that Feng Fei's performance tonight will be her last and farewell performance before she retires. He hopes that Tian Jian can make an official announcement regarding this occurrence.

Tian Jian suggested: "My royal father has the highest admiration for First Mistress's performances. Getting him to announce it would be even better."

Xiang Shaolong praised: "That would be really wonderful! After I offer my congratulations tonight, I will return home earlier to rest in preparation for the duel tomorrow night. Please confer my thanks to the Great King on my behalf."

Tian Jian acknowledged and agreed to his requests.

Using this opening, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and slipped away.

Back at Tingsong Villa, most of the Troupe members have entered the palace for the performance, leaving only a few maids and servants to watch over the premises. The ambience is now cold and uninviting.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to climb the stairs to the main hall, Yao Sheng caught up to him from the back, exclaiming: "Great General, your servant has something to report."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that he had instructed him to put Guo Kai and Han Chuang under surveillance. After he discovered Zongsun Long father and son secretly working with his enemies, and thinking that Yao Sheng is from Zongsun Family, he did not follow up with his progress.

Once the two men sat down at a corner, Yao Sheng narrated with a serious expression: "For the past two days, emissaries of the Three States, Chu and Yan were engaged in one meeting after another. The most frequent meetings occur between the two States of Zhao and Yan. After further investigation, my subordinates reported that swordsmen of

both States have sneaked into Lin Zi City while posing as tourists or guests of the birthday celebrations.”

Xiang Shaolong asked his first question: “Did you tell Master Long or Brother Xuanhua about these information?”

Yao Sheng shook his head, declaring: “Young Master has given specific instructions, saying that as long as we are assigned to Great General, we need not report anything to them. Therefore, they have no idea about this.”

Xiang Shaolong praised: “Only people like you and your men who are familiar with Lin Zi and local issues are able to distinguish the real identities of these Yan and Zhao swordsmen.”

Suppressing his voice, Yao Sheng added: “Yesterday evening, Yan’s Xu Yizhe and Zhao’s Guo Kai went on a tour of Qixia College together. According to the observation of my stalkers, they seemed to be conducting some sort of site inspection.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization: Could Guo Kai and company be so intelligent to correctly guess that he would make his getaway tomorrow and is therefore laying an ambush for him?

Of course that would only happen after the duel with Cao Cuidao.

For the sake of their own States, everyone is resorting to ruthless methods; even Xu Yizhe is of no exception. If they can somehow impersonate themselves as Qi swordsmen and

murder Xiang Shaolong in the territory of Qi, it would be a miracle if Qin and Qi can avoid going to war.

Yao Sheng updated: "Is Great General aware that Grandmaster Cao has requested the Great King to issue an imperial decree, stating that no one is allowed to view or disturb the duel between him and Great General. As a result, before the end of the duel, everyone must stay within the city and even we are not allowed to step into the perimeter of Qixia College."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong grasped that while this is highly beneficial for him who is planning a getaway, it too, provides great convenience for anyone who is trying to ambush him.

Frowning, he interrogated: "Does the report include details such as where they make special stops or spent an extended period of time?"

Producing a geographical map of Qixia College and its surroundings, Yao Sheng painstaking and clearly indicated the travelling path of Guo Kai and Xu Yizhe, where they stopped and how long was each stop.

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Your stalkers are truly meticulous!"

Yao Sheng cheerfully answered: "Your servant recognizes the importance of this matter and was personally involved in the stalking."

From the bottom of his heart, Xiang Shaolong praised him and instructed him to keep this report strictly confidential.

Yao Sheng was hoping mad: "The people of Yan are scoundrels and it is so obvious to me that they are here with malicious agendas, trying to disrupt the friendly diplomacy between us and Qin. Why don't Great General directly feedback this scheme to the Great King, beseeching him to send soldiers to protect Great General or specially allowing us to wait for Great General's triumphant return at the bottom of Stargazing Platform?"

As Xiang Shaolong have other plans in mind, he would not accept his suggestion. Smiling as he patted his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "They would not dare to make any moves within the vicinity of Qixia College. In my opinion, they would probably lay an ambush on the road back to the city. Both sides of the road are thick, snow-covered forests, making it a perfect ambush location. Can you prepare a fire rocket for me? When I am on my way back to the city, I will light the rocket and summon you guys to me."

Agreeing that this is the best way out, Yao Sheng could not help but ask: "Isn't Great General angry with them?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Xu Yizhe and Guo Kai can be considered my acquaintances. Although we would surely meet on the battlefield one day, I hope I can avoid these petty clashes with them. Live and let live."

With admiration written all over his face, Yao Sheng excused himself.

Sitting alone in the hall, his mind is once again filled with thoughts. Recovering from his short daze, he returned back to the rear courtyard.

As he strolled along, he can sense the cold and lonely aura of Tingsong Villa, feeling melancholic as it is now an empty nest with its occupants all gone.

But once he reminded himself that he is going back to Xianyang tomorrow night, his heart immediately warmed up and felt fuzzy instead.

Back home, he must do his best to comfort his pretty wives and lovely maids. Recalling that year when he was returning to Qin from Zhao, Ting Fangshi passed away while pining for him. He could not help but start to feel helpless and frustrated again.

‘You rascal! I finally found you!’

As Xiang Shaolong turned around in shock, Shan Rou was racing towards him, ready to vent her anger on him.

With all his unhappiness chased away by this beauty, Xiang Shaolong opened his palms, challenging: “What does Elder Sister Rou plan to do to Little Brother?”

Grabbing his shirt at the chest area, Shan Rou glared at him with her almond shaped eyes and cursed: “How dare you spoil my fun! Who needs your help? Do you really think you are better than me?” Finishing her sentences, she could not help but burst out in giggles.

Xiang Shaolong cannot resist her allure and patted her smooth face, chuckling: "As a mother of two kids, you are still indulging in violence and fighting. Elder Sister Rou should spare a thought for Brother Xie and avoid getting into scuffles with others."

Since they met in Lin Zi, this is the first time they are sharing such physical intimacy. Her face turning slightly red, Shan Rou wailed: "Do you believe I will hack off your hand if you continue to touch me?"

Xiang Shaolong groaned: "I am leaving tomorrow night; let me take advantage of you while I can!"

Shan Rou was incredulous: "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "I just made up my mind. You must not tell anyone about this. After withstanding ten blows from your Master, I'll be on my way."

Revealing her concern for Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou checked: "Except for the river route that is passable, all road leading away from Lin Zi are all blockaded by snow. Tomorrow, you will be at the centre of everyone's attention; how can you possibly sail away? Who is the person arranging your transport?"

Pulling her to the garden, Xiang Shaolong explained: "I have a safe and excellent travelling method; otherwise, how could I avoid the massive manhunt of the Three States? Do you want to pass a message to your two beloved sisters?"

With a 'Pu Ci', Shan Rou laughed: "Tell them I would definitely outlive Tian Dan. In fact, I am spending my days relishing his suffering and decline."

Her face reddening again, Shan Rou bit her lower lip and suggested: "Since there is nobody around, why don't we go into the room and be intimate with each other!"

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and stammered: "How can we do this? Brother Xie is my buddy."

Shan Rou retorted: "I purposely allowed him to fool around because I wanted to fool around with you too. That will equalize the score and it is very fair and just."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "You are wrong about Brother Xie. Only when he is in a brothel setting can his creative juices start to flow and allow him to compose new songs. He did not commit any shameful acts behind your back."

Momentarily dazed, Shan Rou passionately leaned closer and offered her lips, declaring: "Then let's share a kiss! Treat it as a kiss of encouragement for your duel and also a goodbye kiss for your trip!"

Shan Rou had barely left when Xie Ziyuan arrived.

Xiang Shaolong thought: What a close shave!

After scrutinizing him for a while, Xie Ziyuan heaved a sigh of relief: "Little Brother thought she would have given you a beating! Xuanhua told me that after she learnt that you had returned home, she hurried over here like a mad woman."

With his fingers crossed, Xiang Shaolong remarked: "Sister in law is not an unreasonable person. It is just that her temper is unbearable!"

Taking a seat, Xie Ziyuan observed: "Now that this place is deserted, I find it rather peaceful instead. We can speak our hearts without fear."

Sitting down beside him, an astonished Xiang Shaolong probed: "What is on Brother Xie's mind?"

Xie Ziyuan sighed with a breath of air: "You might find it unbelievable but I am thinking of quitting! However, Second Prince would not hear of it."

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: "Brother Xie is doing very well in your official career. Why are you suddenly thinking of retiring?"

Xie Ziyuan bitterly smiled: "As officials, most of us would have a terrible ending. The higher our ranks, the more enemies we have. When you are riding high, nobody could touch you but when you eventually make mistakes, others would start vying for your position. Besides managing your subordinates, you have to live in constant fear of offending your superiors. Such a life is truly meaningless. Wifey has always mentioned that I am ill suited for an official career as I am not vicious enough. For example, Zongsun Long father and son have disappointed me thoroughly. Till now, they have not told me about their secret meeting with Lu Buwei."

Sighing along with him, Xiang Shaolong advised: "There is a trick to quitting an official career. Just feign an illness."

Enlightened by his words, Xie Ziyuan's eyes began to glow. Slapping the table, he exclaimed: "Brother Xiang is wise indeed. That's it. For all you know, I may be able to visit Brother Xiang in Xianyang in the near future; and not forgetting Talented Lady Ji. Hey! With Brother Xiang's connections, I may even get to meet Widow Qin!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not aware of the relationship between Qin Qing and himself. Patting his chest, he swore: "You can count on Little Brother."

Concurrently, his heart skipped a beat as he recollected Xiao Pan's identity crisis.

Gazing at the sky outside the hall, Xie Ziyuan suggested: "I have to enter the palace earlier than usual. Later, allow me to get somebody to fetch Brother Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong politely rejected his offer and personally sent him off before returning to his room. Lying on his bed, he took out Yao Sheng's map and began analyzing it.

If he was Xu Yizhe or Guo Kai, he would definitely place an ambush on both sides of the mile long official road between Qixia College and the City highway. If an arrow attack is launched under the cover of the thick and snowy forests on both sides of the road, the target would be unable to react in time and his death is guaranteed.

If he had pretended to walk back to Lin Zi City but suddenly run away in the direction of the snowy wilderness, how would the ambushers react?

The sound of knocking is heard and in came Xiao Yuetan.

Xiang Shaolong jumped out of bed and passed the map to him while repeating Yao Sheng's report.

Pointing to a southwestern mark outside Qixia College, Xiao Yuetan described: "Tomorrow, I will bury travelling clothes and the snowboard on top of a small hill over here. It will be at the top of a west facing slope, allowing you to conveniently slide down."

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: "Is it completed?"

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: "It should be completed after a night's work. I will be skipping the banquet tonight and at the same time, prevent Lu Buwei from identifying myself."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling bad: "Isn't it a waste?"

Xiao Yuetan nonchalantly state: "Entertainment accounts for nothing. Only when Shaolong has safely returned to Xianyang can we continue our campaign against Lu Buwei. You may not see me tomorrow. Elder Brother came here specially to bade farewell to you."

Stretching out his own hand and strongly gripping Xiao Yuetan's hand, Xiang Shaolong gratefully thanked: "The deepest gratitude lies beyond thanking. I do not know what to say to express the emotions in my heart."

Xiao Yuetan grinned: "I am sure these thoughts would change in the near future. Everything I do is for your own good. Help Elder Brother send my regards to Yanran and the others, tell them Elder Brother misses them terribly."

Xiang Shaolong was baffled: "Why is Elder Brother speaking like this? No matter what happens, I, Xiang Shaolong, would never blame you for anything."

Staring intently at Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan warned: "A man's heart is impossible to fathom. Do not keep thinking that you can get away with merely ten strokes. You must always take precautions in case he changes his mind due to aggravation."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "After making the mistake of trusting Li Yuan and Han Chuang, I am not as gullible as before."

Hearing his words, Xiao Yuetan became visibly relaxed. He further reminded: "If you can survive this difficulty and successfully return to Xianyang, your victory would be complete. Otherwise, all your previous efforts would have gone down the drain."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong knows that he still have to resolve Xiao Pan's identity predicament. Unfortunately, he cannot share this burden with Xiao Yuetan. He solemnly swore: "I would not lose this fight."

Xiao Yuetan was elated: "Shaolong has finally regained your confidence!"

Xiang Shaolong muttered to himself: "It is very mysterious. Having lost Hundred Battle Sabre and repossessing it later, I felt like a completely different person. I felt as if I did not suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Li Mu. It was a full

recovery from the period of time when I was utterly depressed.”

Xiao Yuetan stood up and bade: “There is no need to send me off. Please take good care of yourself. There may come a time in the future when we will head out to the borders together and turn our sights to the huge grasslands.”

His eyes trailing Xiao Yuetan’s back until he disappeared at the extreme end of the corridor, Xiang Shaolong suddenly remember the first time when he met Xiao Yuetan in Handan. After this talented and capable man finished their official discussions, he immediately requested a courtesan from the Wu Family to accompany him to bed, leaving him a bad impression of this man. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect Xiao Yuetan to be a righteous hero and even ended up as his soul mate.

The path of life is never a straight line.

Aye!

Since he is going to the birthday banquet, he might as well be early.

Since he became a fugitive, not a day goes by without him pining for his home. Only at home can he find the long awaited feelings of true happiness and peace.

CHAPTER 9

The Grand Banquet At The Palace Of Qi

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

ON the way to the palace, Xiang Shaolong observed that the roads leading to the Small City where the palace was located was packed with numerous carriages and they were travelling at a snail's pace. He could not help but praised himself for making the excellent choice of riding a horse. Riding along the walkway or squeezing between carriages according the available road conditions with Yao Sheng and his team, they agilely and swiftly made their way towards the palace.

Wherever he rode, people started staring at him. Regardless of girls from rich families or the wives of officials, everyone pulled aside their carriage curtains to catch a glimpse of his elegant demeanor, wanting to see for themselves the appearance of this man who is able to win the heart of Talented Lady Ji.

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not disappoint them. With a warrior headband around his forehead, an exquisite inner shirt and a long and huge cape, he was particularly outstanding. In addition, his back is straight, his handsome features are well-defined and the corner of his lips is portrayed in a somewhat faint smirk. Coupled with the world famous Hundred Battle Sabre hanging around his waist, he exudes a mesmerizing charm that would overwhelm all the beauties under the sky.

Yao Sheng and the others share his glory too. With puffed chests and straightened backs, they are awe-inspiring in their own right.

Overtaking every carriage they met, they soon came to the entrance of Small City. The Imperial Guards solemnly saluted Xiang Shaolong upon laying their eyes on him.

Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, is feeling as calm as still water, beyond the reaches of happiness or sadness.

Before he set off, he meditated for a full two hours before taking a shower and getting a change of clothes. He can feel his own alertness and energy level at a peak that he has never attained before. Brimming with hope and confidence,

he can feel that he is in complete control of everything that is about to happen.

The troubles in life will repeat themselves endlessly.

Since he left Xianyang and took his first step into the battlefield, he has been living under immense stress and danger every second of his life. When he became a fugitive, he was forced to make life and death choices on an hourly basis. Up till this point when he was about to pit his skills against this behemoth of swordsmanship for a clear cut victory and trek through countless hills and cross numerous rivers to return to his warm and inviting home, he felt as if his entire life has accomplished an incredible sense of fulfillment.

He must always remind himself of this wonderful feeling. Although the sounds of people and carriages are conjured around him, he felt as if they are a long distance away from him.

Everything that enters his sight seemed to be surreal. The only genuine sensations he can experience are his own body and the movement of the horse.

He is deeply entrenched in this amazing time travel dream, sinking to the innermost sanctum of it. There, he is beyond salvation, beyond redemption and cannot even wake up even if he wants to.

Out of the blue, someone called out: Great General, taking his out of his stupor.

Xiang Shaolong reduced his horse-riding speed and turned his head in the direction of the voice. Three carriages behind him, he noticed someone sticking his head out of the carriage window and is waving at him. It turned out to be Guo Kai.

The Zhao riders surrounding Guo Kai's carriage saluted him.

Xiang Shaolong held his horse on the same spot. After much difficulty, the carriage managed to catch up from the back. Guo Kai sighed: "I finally get to meet Shaolong. In Shouchun, we were facing each other but I did not recognize you. Now, we can officially talk with our real identities. Empress Jing has been pining for you!"

This crafty ghost Guo Kai has aged considerably, becoming so fat that his face is completely round, losing much of his past grandeur. Although Xiang Shaolong dislike him and knew that he is scheming against himself, he pretended to be intimate with this old friend, chuckling: "Chancellor Guo must be living a good life without worries and stress, causing you to put on weight. If we met on the streets, I may not be able to recognise you!"

His gaze shifting to the Hundred Battle Sabre, Guo Kai emotionally remarked: "Back in the past, the late King made a wrong decision and placed his trust in Zhao Mu. Otherwise, not only would Shaolong and I still be best friends, we may even be partners working hand in hand to resist our common enemies."

Adjusting his horse to match the slow speed of the carriage, Xiang Shaolong is rotating between occasional stops or sluggish canter. With Yao Sheng and his compatriots escorting him from the front and back, they are inadvertently drawing more attention to themselves.

Crossing into Small City, the celebratory aura in the air is even more prominent than before. Every household is lavishly decorated with lighted lanterns and red banners while the sound of firecrackers popping consistently invaded his eardrums.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Unfortunately, there is no 'otherwise' in real life. For example, after a man has died, he cannot be brought back to life. Even if you can re-experience a past moment of your life, things will still turn out the same way."

Of course Guo Kai is unable to comprehend the true essence of his feelings. Continuing his previous topic, he added: "Reminiscing about the past, one cannot help but feel emotional. Nevertheless, an outstanding talent will shine wherever he goes. Shaolong is a fine example."

Xiang Shaolong was restless, being able to sense that an emotional Guo Kai is exhibiting rare honesty, given his deplorable character, due to his knowledge about tomorrow's event. From his point of view, Xiang Shaolong would either perish under the hands of Cao Cuidao or the ambush that he has laid.

Why is he feeling so confident?

Did he really correctly guess that Xiang Shaolong is prepared to slip away tomorrow night?

Unless there is a spy within the Song & Dance Troupe who had told him that Xiang Shaolong has been delivering instructions in a manner that resembles a dying man reading out his will, an outsider should not have been able to make such a wise deduction.

At this juncture, his mind suddenly recalled Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning'er. He had suspected that she was the one who stole the song sheet for Zhang Quan but was unable to prove it

If Guo Kai managed to get in touch with Zhang Quan, they could easily track Xiang Shaolong's activities. All along, Guo Kai is a clever and scheming person. Observant and sharp, he is able to link small incidents to a bigger picture. Moreover, he is knowledgeable about Xiang Shaolong's character and it is not impossible for him to lay an inescapable ambush.

If this is proven to be true, the element of danger for tomorrow night would be significantly higher. Besides ambushing the road back to the City, the Yan and Zhao attackers may extend their ambush to cover other areas. To make it worse, nobody else can help him. This has to be a solo battle.

Guo Kai was astonished: "What is Shaolong thinking about?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "I was thinking that if Chancellor Guo were to send someone to try and kill me, I would not bear any hatred against you."

Guo Kai violently trembled: "But I would not feel good about it. If not for Shaolong sparing my life at Handan's Hostage Residence years ago, I, Guo Kai, would not be able to accomplish what I have today. This development is truly regrettable."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to remember that incident and his goodwill towards him increased by a few notches. However, he did not know what to say for the time being.

Guo Kai suddenly questioned: "Back then, Lady Ni left a son after passing away. Did he follow Shaolong to Xianyang? Why didn't I hear anything about him? Lady Ni is a good lady, someone worth commemorating. Unfortunately, Heaven is jealous of her beauty. Aye!"

Suppressing the tsunami erupting in his mind, Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lu Buwei's willful spreading of Xiao Pan's questionable heritage is akin to throwing a huge boulder into a pool of still water; throwing up many scenarios and questions. For example, Guo Kai is now suspecting that Xiao Pan is Yingzheng himself.

This is no laughing matter. If Lu Buwei gets wind of this and matching the testimony of the couple he kidnapped from Handan, this would become a debate they cannot hope to win.

He instead replied: "Grieving for his mother's passing, the kid refuses to eat or drink during the journey. Due to the

harsh travelling conditions, he eventually succumbed to illness and death.”

Guo Kai acknowledged with an ‘Orh’, but his expression tells Xiang Shaolong that he had already anticipated this answer from him.

No longer keen to stick around him, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and pushed the horse to go faster. Overtaking ten odd carriages in a row, he entered the palace.

The palace of Qi was extravagantly adorned and it was an imposing sight.

The throne and the VIP tables are located on the top of Henggong Platform, numbering close to a hundred. At the square below Henggong Platform, over a thousand tables were neatly arranged. They were assigned to the lower ranking civil and military officials, as well as the rich tycoons or educated scholars who are invited to the banquet.

The performing stage for the Song & Dance routine is the raised stage in the centre of Henggong Platform. The musicians are based on the lower level and facing the throne.

Within the palace, every available spot is crowded with people who are dressed to the nines. For the ladies, they cannot avoid competing with each other in terms of their dressing.

Covered with a blanket and lying down, the King of Qi is at Dianjiang Platform, the lower deck of Henggong Platform.

With a delighted expression, he was busy receiving congratulations from his well wishers.

Tian Jian is even more enthusiastic than him. With his kingly future secured, everyone is flattering him nonstop and trying their best to get into his good books. Even those who didn't know what is going on would somehow have an idea that he would become an important figure of Qi.

After Xiang Shaolong offered his congratulations to the King of Qi, he noticed Zongsun Long fighting for Tian Jian's attention and sweet-talking him. Inversely, Tian Dan is standing at a side with a look of contempt on his face while chatting idly with Lu Buwei and Guo Kai. He could not help but think of Xiao Pan again.

Whoever that becomes King would certainly be corrupted by power and the flattery of officials, blinding himself to the truth in time to come. This kind of side effect has become the norm. Xiao Pan is visibly a changed man. How long can their mutual trusts last?

Li Yuan's voice sounded beside his ear: "Shaolong! Let's find a quiet place and have a chat."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Is there a quiet place here? Do we need to walk a few miles?"

Li Yuan laughed along and pulled him towards the door of the platform. As they walked past a group of concubines, the various ladies were staring intensely at the two of them.

Thinking of Lady Qingxiu and Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong scanned their faces but did not manage to pinpoint the two ladies among them.

Squeezing out of the overcrowded hall, the two men climbed to the top of Henggong Platform. There, palace maids are busying themselves by laying the tables as well as arranging delicious food and wine. It was a lively scene.

Making their way to a corner of Henggong Platform that was far away from the throne where one can see the wilderness and horizon over and beyond the city walls, Li Yuan leaned on a railing under the bright illumination of lanterns, checking: "When does Shaolong intend to return to Xianyang; are you open to travelling with Little Brother?"

Xiang Shaolong is unable to find any traces of hatred for him within his heart. He plainly answered: "There is no need to trouble you. Travelling through Wei would be faster and sailing is much more comfortable."

Li Yuan agreed: "You can save half the travelling time; however, are there any security concerns?"

Xiang Shaolong responded: "I will officially ask Qi to send a team to escort me home. Coupled with Zongsun Long's protection and arrangements, there shouldn't be a problem."

Li Yuan kept probing: "When do you plan to leave?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "I can only leave after the Qixia College Performance, otherwise, it would be hard for me to put my mind at ease."

Li Yuan suppressed his voice: "Tomorrow night, you must take extra precautions. I am confident that Shaolong would survive your duel with Grandmaster Cao. However, the people of Qi would not take this lying down. I have heard rumours saying that the Extremists of Qixia are preparing to ambush you on the way back to the city should you emerge victorious from the fight. Why don't I fetch you personally? You can use a fire signal to communicate with me."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised his formidability. If he does not know that Li Yuan is Guo Kai's accomplice, it would be a miracle if he did not fall into their trap.

From his sentences, he could also be testing Xiang Shaolong to see if he would slip away under the cover of the night.

With such 'kind intentions', it would be illogical for him to refuse. Xiang Shaolong promptly agreed and indicated the fire signals that he would employ.

He then intentionally brought up: "When you are back at Shouchun, please send my regards to your wife and Empress."

A sensation of deep pain flashed past his eyes as Li Yuan suddenly grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulder's, stammering: "Shaolong..."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling agitated too but he calmly wondered: "Yes?"

Extracting himself from his emotional state, Li Yuan loosened his grip and shook his head, lamenting: "Nothing. Thinking that we would soon be separated from each other and may even meet on the battlefield, fighting for our right to live, I could not help but feel exasperated! It is really nothing."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself!

Han Chuang's laughter filled the air as he approached them: "I didn't know Chancellor Li and Great General were hiding here. Shaolong is truly remarkable, with the Three Famous Courtesans taking turns to ask me where is our handsome friend. Little Marquis is so jealous I feel like committing suicide!"

If not for their enmity, Han Chuang would definitely make an excellent partying companion.

Thinking that he should do his bit to stimulate the morale of the Song & Dance Troupe, especially Dong Shuzen who is taking centerstage for the first time, Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Where are they?"

Arriving at the front of the two men, Han Chuang replied: "They are at the lowest platform, Cihuai Platform. Shall Little Marquis lead the way?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I shall visit them and subsequently find an opportunity to leave early."

Li Yuan understandingly agreed: "That's the way. Sufficient rest is crucial. Let us accompany you!"

Walking between the two men, Xiang Shaolong took the chance to request: "Regardless of what happens between the various States, I hope that both gentlemen can grant me a favour: Take good care of Shuzen."

Han Chuang sighed: "Relax! If we cannot even do something as simple as that, can we be considered human?"

Xiang Shaolong took his word for it.

Stepping into Cihuai Platform, Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Originally, a gigantic hall, it was partitioned by cloth into three areas and it is swarming with people. The sound of ladies giggling and teasing each other sounded continuously.

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Let's part ways here. I wish to meet them alone."

With a heavy expression on their faces, Li Yuan and Han Chuang held his hands as a form of goodbye. Li Yuan offered: "Let us escort you out of the city tomorrow."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I'll be fine! Lu Buwei and Second Prince have already informed me that they will be escorting me."

Sitting alone in front of a bronze mirror, Feng Fei is receiving last minute touching up of her make up by Little Ping'er and Yunniang.

Xiang Shaolong was moved by her beauty. He acknowledged: "No wonder First Mistress is able to head the Three Famous Courtesans. With your beauty alone, it is more than enough to convince anyone that you are an angel from heaven."

Feng Fei gave him a sweet smile but complained: "Without you appreciating at the side, being an angel is meaningless! After all, this is my last performance!"

The next second, she laughed: "Ignore my whining. Great General's duel tomorrow night is critical. Be a good boy and go to bed early tonight! Feng Fei will spend her whole day with you tomorrow."

Keeping a lookout from the corner of his eye, Xiang Shaolong noticed Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning'er making an excuse to get close to them. Confirming his suspicions that she plans to spy on their conversation, he intentionally declared: "After Little Brother's triumphant return, I shall accompany First Mistress to go sightseeing."

Feng Fei happily agreed.

Approaching Dong Shuzen, Xiang Shaolong inquired: "Are you feeling nervous?"

Standing beside Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen giggled: "Second Mistress dare not speak the entire day for fear of spoiling her vocal cords. What does Great General think about her nervousness?"

Dong Shuzen secretly gripped his hand tightly and leaned towards his ear, whispering: "The night after tomorrow, I shall accompany you to bed."

Xiang Shaolong left with a bitter smile. Touring one round within the partition, he observed that various Troupe members are highly spirited and do not require him to boost their morale. Feeling satisfied and fulfilled, he pushed aside a cloth partition in order to leave the area. Unexpectedly, he ran into Boss Jin who consequently dragged him to meet Shi Sufang.

Covered with a hooded cape, Shi Sufang is standing at one corner like a ghost, silently watching the other members of her troupe completing their assigned tasks. She appeared to be isolated from the rest of them and in the same context, no one dared to disturb her tranquility.

Boss Jin whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ear: "Since she was young, Sufang has always maintained her withdrawn character. Nevertheless, her talent cannot be denied. She cannot be bothered with anything but the minute she learns something, she would easily surpass her teachers. In her whole lifetime, she only respects Feng Fei and no other."

Xiang Shaolong could imagine that she does not have any regards for Talented Lady Ji too. Otherwise, why didn't she pay her a visit.

Leading Xiang Shaolong to Shi Sufang's side, Boss Jin softly called: "Sufang! Sufang! Great General is here to visit you!"

Hearing the Great General title, Shi Sufang's petite frame faintly shuddered and brilliance started to return to her hollow eyes. Turning her pretty head, she looked at the direction of Xiang Shaolong.

At this juncture, all her fellow courtesans and troupe workers stopped what they were doing and gazed at Xiang Shaolong with astonishment. When Boss Jin waved them off with a gesture, they unwilling continued their original work, such as applying make up or tuning their musical instruments.

Patting Xiang Shaolong, Boss Jin remarked: "The two of you should have a good talk!"

Visibly annoyed with the intermittent peeping by the other troupe members, Shi Sufang lightly invited: "Great General, please follow Sufang!"

Pulling a curtain behind her, it turned out to be a specially partitioned small area. The ground was covered by a mat and there are sitting cushions as well. A long bronze mirror and a rack full of costumes are present too.

Both of them sat on the floor.

Despite being surrounded by noise and the occasional tuning sounds from musical instruments, this enclosed area is surprisingly quiet and private.

With her pitiful-looking and mesmerizing eyes slowing scanning Xiang Shaolong, Shi Sufang then turned her gaze to

a curtain by the side and plainly questioned: "Does Great General enjoy loneliness?"

After careful consideration, Xiang Shaolong gingerly answered: "Some of the time, I need my personal space and silence, which allows me to go into deep contemplation."

With a melancholic tone, Shi Sufang inquired: "What do you contemplate about?"

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "There is no fixed thought. It depends on what are the matters that are troubling me!"

Shi Sufang nodded: "You are very frank. In fact, among all the men that Sufang has met, Great General's complete honesty and un-hypocritical character is rare indeed. Most of them love to boast about their own achievements, as if they are afraid that I do not recognize them for their talents. It is truly disgusting."

Shifting her gaze back to his face and looking at him in such a manner than Xiang Shaolong can start to feel something for her, Shi Sufang divulged: "After our meeting at Xianyang, Great General has left a deep impression in Sufang's heart. At that time, Sufang was thinking, is Great General someone I can confide in?"

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but utter: "I heard Mister Pu Hu is on good terms with Miss!"

Revealing bitter smile on her face, Shi Sufang lowered her gaze and calmly professed: "It is either A kill B or B kill A.

Moreover, everyone has to die one day and become a star in the sky. What is there to be worried about?"

Xiang Shaolong quietly pondered on the meaning of her words and the negative connotation. For a period of time, he was dumbfounded.

Shi Sufang seems to be mired in her self-created dreamy state that she can never hope to exit. In a gentle voice, she described: "Sufang's only desire is to simplify my life and does not wish to have too many people or circumstances involved. Aye! More often than not, the people and situations in life are but a fleeting moment. Although they truly exist, they remained meaningless to me. How I wish I can become a tree, slowly and quietly growing up all by myself in the wilderness. All I need is sunshine, rainwater and soil."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "No wonder Miss enjoys the theories of Zhuang Zhou."

Shi Sufang added: "And Li Er. For everything in life you can do with, you can also do without. A small state with an even smaller population, there is zero social interaction. What a thorough understanding of life! Fame and riches will only bring about inequality in society. The tussle between humans is never-ending. Great General, what are your views on this?"

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen someone from this era who loves to be left alone and with an anti-progression and anti-human advancement mindset. In

addition, this person happens to be a female. He nodded: "Presently, the situation is not that bad. With a massive increase in population and the grasslands transforming into cities, and the resources of nature are being consumed non-stop until they are lacking, on top of animals having nowhere to reside because of urbanization, that would be scary."

Shi Sufang vividly shivered: "Great General has more foresight than Sufang."

Xiang Shaolong exhaled with a breath: "This development will certainly materialize itself. From the beginning of time, human intelligence has been sitting on the opposite fence of nature. We are unlike plants and animals who coexist peacefully with our environment."

After some thought and displaying signs of unhappiness, Shi Sufang quizzed: "When does Great General intend to return to Qin?"

Xiang Shaolong answered: "Probably these few days. Hey! I need to make a move too."

Nodding her head slightly, Shi Sufang did not reply and sank into deep contemplation.

Standing up, Xiang Shaolong left as quietly as possible.

CHAPTER 10

Farewell Letters

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

FENG FEI and the others got home around one am that same night. Everyone is behaving in a joyful manner, indicating that the performance is a great success.

Several of the courtesans quietly entered his room to check on him. Resisting the urge to get up, Xiang Shaolong pretended to be sleeping in response to their invasion.

When the rear courtyard has more or less resumed its tranquility, Xiang Shaolong sat down in lotus position and began meditating according to Mozi's teachings and

rejuvenating breathing techniques. Before dawn, he took Hundred Battle Sabre to the garden for another round of practice.

He was glad that he left before the end of the banquet last night and is able to preserve the tiptop condition of his mental and physical strength.

Using both his hands to hold the sabre, he repeatedly maneuvered several moves, trying to simplify the process. Placing speed as his top priority, he fought an imaginary Cao Cuidao.

Fighting against this Sword Saint, even the ever-changing and incredible swordplay of Mozi became useless moves.

He can only gather the essence of scientific and modern attacks, merging it with his sabre play.

At that time, most of the other Troupe members are either dead drunk or still in dreamland. Delighted to be left undisturbed, he can focus his mind and concentrate on his warm up exercises.

He proceeded to the bathroom and enjoyed a cold shower. With his alertness at full capacity, he returned back to his room for another round of mediation. Shortly thereafter, Little Ping'er came to summon him.

At the breakfast table, the courtesans are in full attendance. Yunnian, the Head Musician cum Conductor, as well as several other accomplished musicians were present too.

For a start, Feng Fei represented everyone in expressing their gratitude for Xiang Shaolong. With her eyes full of reminiscence, she recounted: "At the end of Shuzen's song, Prince (Tian) Jian officially announced the retirement of Feng Fei. The standing ovation of the audience is something I can never forget."

Yunniang giggled: "Everyone who is present is honoured to have viewed First Mistress's last performance."

Zhu Xiuzhen enthusiastically described: "Last night, First Mistress's performance is simply fantastic and even we are intoxicated by her singing. No one is able to retain his or her senses at her spellbinding vocals. For a while, we were worried that Second Mistress may put up an inferior performance due to the pressure from First Mistress. Luckily, Second Mistress is able to deliver a spectacular song, cumulating in a breathtaking finale of the Song & Dance presentation."

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed: "Are you people trying to make me feel bad?" The ladies burst into shrill laughter at his teasing.

Dong Shuzen gratefully extended: "Li Yuan of Chu, Marquis Chuang of Han and Lord Longyang of Wei have officially invited us to perform at their respective States..."

Xinyue interrupted: "Only Great General of Qin has yet to officially invite us."

The ladies began laughing again and the ambience is relaxing and friendly. This is also because the depressing mood of

troupe disbandment no longer exists. Xiang Shaolong guffawed: "We are one big family right? When you people come over to Xianyang, it is as good as coming home. See, isn't this better than an invitation?" The ladies burst out in giggles again.

Dong Shuzen wondered out loud: "What does First Mistress and Great General think of Fei Chun?" Both of them can tell that she is picking a new manager and praised her foresight.

After breakfast has concluded, Xiang Shaolong and Fei Fei went for a stroll in the garden. Both parties can feel a lump in their throats.

Feng Fei calmly state: "For the time being, I will not be going to Xianyang!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Where does Mistress intend to go?"

Gazing at a particularly large cluster of clouds floating in the sky, Feng Fei replied: "Feng Fei is thinking of following Lady Qingxiu back to Chu and staying there for some time. I have grown tired of the extreme cold weather and would like to experience the marvelous sights of the south."

Xiang Shaolong made a wild guess that she wanted to avoid Han Jie and nodded: "It is good to have a change of environment. Xianyang's winter is quite tormenting as well."

Feng Fei shot him a look: "Do not think that you have gotten rid of me; maybe one day, I will come looking for you at your residence and refuse to leave."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that she is joking and loudly laughed: "This is something no man in his right mind would reject. Seriously speaking, First Mistress must not forget to come and visit Little Brother."

With a melancholic tone, Feng Fei enquired: "Is Great General leaving tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong answered in a deep voice: "If I can survive the duel, it would be unwise for me to hang around here."

Feng Fei cheerfully exclaimed: "Great General is finally trusting Feng Fei wholeheartedly. With this knowledge, I will no longer have any regrets in life."

She added in a gentle voice: "Feng Fei will rather die than divulge Xiang Shaolong's secret."

Xiang Shaolong reminisced that both of them have progressed from mutual distrust to mutual scheming to this final stage of mutually regarding each other as a confidante and could not help but feel his heart brimming with delight and comfort.

One of the touching moments about life is that ugliness and beauty can coexist in the same dimension. The human nature is an uneven object; depending on the angle you are viewing from, you will get a different perspective every time.

For example, it is challenging for him to classify Li Yuan or Han Chuang as villains.

Every person has his or her principles. When there are benefits involved and others are forced to act against you, you would naturally get angry and regard them with hatred.

Feng Fei suddenly mentioned: "It will be sunset before you know it. Aye, it is truly heartrending when I do not know if I can ever see Great General again in the future."

At this juncture, Xiao Yuetan came to look for Xiang Shaolong, interrupting their farewell speeches. At the Eastern Chamber, Xiao Yuetan produced a stack of parchments and snickered: "I wrote these letters for you this morning. They are farewell letters to Lu Buwei, the King of Qi, newly promoted Crown Prince Tian Jian, Xie Ziyuan and not forgetting Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Zongsun Long. The letters to Li Yuan and Han Chuang are imbued with special meaning. After browsing through, do sign them if you have no issue with the content. After your successful departure, I will get Feng Fei to send them out on your behalf."

Xiang Shaolong was worried: "Aren't you concerned that Lu Buwei would recognize your handwriting?"

Xiao Yuetan assured: "I am well-versed in all kinds of handwriting and forgery; I guarantee that he would be unable to recognize it."

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a praise: "Not harnessing the abilities of a talented man like yourself, Lu Buwei is as stupid as can be."

Xiao Yuetan viciously reasoned: "He is purposely sacrificing me to divert suspicions away from himself. At the same time, he can use this opportunity to weaken the prowess of his Old Guard."

Xiao Yuetan is a man who values relationships and is especially disgusted with Lu Buwei's ungrateful behavior.

Right now, he is doing everything he can to assist Xiang Shaolong without any reservations is precisely because they are similar in nature.

Xiang Shaolong casually selected one of the letters and opened it up for a look. The letter read: Greetings to Marquis Chuang. By the time Lord Marquis is reading this letter, Shaolong is miles away. For me to leave without saying goodbye, I am forced by circumstances and Lord Marquis should know better than myself. I trust that you will not blame Shaolong for being impolite. Life is full of happiness and sorrow; coming and going; love and hatred, friendship and enmity. Now that we have split paths once again, our next meeting remains an unknown. I pray that everything will go smoothly for Lord Marquis and may Lord Marquis live a life of longevity. Yours sincerely, Shaolong.

Holding the letter, Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "When Han Chuang reads this letter, he would be experiencing a hundred and one emotions simultaneously. He would have trouble expressing his difficulties."

Xiao Yuetan proudly selected another letter and passed to him, remarking: "This is for Li Yuan."

Xiang Shaolong held up the letter and read: "Chancellor Li, my respected elder brother. Life is unpredictable and full of gatherings and separations. Recalling the times when we fight side by side and watching each other's back with no reservations, the memory is still fresh within me. Regrettably, times have changed and the past cannot be repeated in the present. It is painfully lamentable. Now that Little Brother is on my way home, I sincerely wish Chancellor every success in your career and may you never be toppled."

Slapping the table, Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Can we add two sentences? However, the copywriting has to be done by Elder Brother. I really love the hot-cold sarcastic style of writing." He proceeded to tell Xiao Yuetan about last night when Li Yuan offered to escort him back from Qixia College.

Readied with a brush and ink, Xiao Yuetan held his laughter as he added to the end of the message: Regarding Chancellor's desire to escort me, pardon Little Brother for not taking it up. I will never forget your kind gesture.

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table again and praised his intellect.

The other letters to the King of Qi, Zongsun Long, etc were rather ordinary and there was nothing noteworthy about the dictation. The letter to Lord Longyang is the most polite-sounding and appropriate emotions were highlighted in the letter, demonstrating Xiao Yuetan's creative writing talent.

Scrutinizing Xiao Yuetan's eyes, Xiang Shaolong observed: "Elder Brother must have worked through the night and even had to write these letters early in the morning."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "Skipping a night of sleep is no big deal. The most important thing right now is to ensure that there is nothing distracting you. These letters also serve as a means to boost your fighting spirit. If you somehow lost the fight, these letters would have to be burnt."

Slapping the table and standing up, Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and let out a long laughter: "Relax. I am current at the peak of my abilities. Be it a Sword Saint or a Sword Demon, I will give it everything I've got and would deny him victory at all costs."

Stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan smiled: "I am going to disguise myself and leave the city, heading to the designated place to bury your escaping equipment for tonight. I will send out the letters for Shaolong tomorrow!"

After Xiao Yuetan's departure, the newly promoted Manager Fei Chun approached him to show his appreciation. Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong instructed: "Get someone to secretly spy on Little Ning. If she left the Villa and meet up with an outsider before I leave for my duel, tell Miss Xiuzhen to terminate her employment but do not punish her."

According to his observations, if Little Ning is a spy, she would surely have to provide a latest update about himself to the person who had bribed her. He added: "If nothing happened, take it that you never hear this from me."

Fei Chun realized what is going on and acted on his instructions.

Stretching his back, Xiang Shaolong is feeling totally relaxed.

What appeared to be some challenging difficulties are eventually beautifully resolved. All that remains is Cao Qiudao's challenge and avoiding the ambush of the Yan and Zhao swordsmen. With the snowboard, he has to speed back to Zhongmou before the snow melts. Once he reunites with Teng Yi and his other brothers, they would return to Qin together and this horrible chapter would come to a close.

Of course Xiao Pan's identity crisis needs to be solved but for the time being, he can only trust that history will not be altered.

At least in the records of history, it was not mentioned that Qin Shihuang is born outside the royal family and he is definitely not documented as the son of Lu Buwei.

In the same aspect, he could not comprehend the obvious absence of an earth-shattering figure such as himself.

In the middle of this troublesome reflection, Lord Longyang came to him with two reddish eyes. Needless to say, Xiang Shaolong knew that he had had a sleepless night.

Coming to a small pavilion in the garden, Lord Longyang sighed with a breath. It seems like he has so much to say but didn't know how to begin.

Xiang Shaolong consoled him instead: "Life and Death are predetermined; Wealth and Poverty depends on Fate. If

Heaven is not ready for my death, even ten Cao Qiudaos cannot lay a finger on me.”

Lord Longyang grudgingly smiled: “Perhaps Shaolong believes that Cao Qiudao is capable of showing mercy. Last night, I received news that Tian Dan had a two hour discussion with him; what do you think Tian Dan is doing?”

Xiang Shaolong was unnerved, believing that since Cao Qiudao has given his word to Xiao Yuetan, no one would be able to influence his decision.

Patting the scabbard of Hundred Battle Sabre once, Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “If he wants to kill me, he has to ask my best friend first.”

Lord Longyang forcefully recomposed his spirit and clarified: “I am not trying to be a wet blanket but it is my desire to remind Shaolong not to underestimate the enemy. If you can fight, so be it. If you cannot, simply run away. He is an old man after all and I don’t think he can outrun you.”

Xiang Shaolong was not agitated at all. He mused: “At the end of the day, you are concerned that he may take my life.”

Staring intently at him for some time, Lord Longyang professed with astonishment: “Shaolong is truly extraordinary. If it was anybody but you, it would be impossible for him to remain unaffected when faced with such a formidable fighter.”

Xiang Shaolong honestly expressed: "Worrying is futile. I might as well apply the energy towards handling my opponent during the fight. Isn't that a better strategy?"

Leaning on a railing, Lord Longyang lowered his head and disclosed: "Li Yuan and Han Chuang..."

Interrupting him with a determined tone, Xiang Shaolong concluded: "Your Lordship need not go on. From now until I am done with Cao Qiudao, I do not wish to hear anything that concerns the two of them."

Lord Longyang was visibly shaken. He uttered: "Shaolong... .."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You say it best, when you say nothing at all. Your Lordship should go home and have a good rest. Don't think so much. I will speak with you tomorrow!"

Lord Longyang slowly stepped to his front and gave him a light embrace, commending: "Shaolong's overwhelming confidence has convinced me that you will surely surmount all sorts of difficulties. Take care of yourself."

Watching the back of Lord Longyang gradually disappearing under the cover of the trees, Xiang Shaolong felt immensely apologetic.

Under the leadership of Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen, every single Troupe member is assembled at the courtyard square, bidding farewell to their hero. Their eyes trailed his back

until he boarded the carriage of Lu Buwei and the new Crown Prince Tian Jian.

With their flags fluttering in a grand appearance, scores of Qi soldiers neatly rode out of Tingsong Villa, paving way for the carriage carrying the three men. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

With a team of one hundred Imperial Guards protecting them, they entered the highway. On both sides of the roads, people have gathered to send them off. It is not known if they are supporting Cao Qiudao or admiring Xiang Shaolong's 'act of valor'.

Including Xiang Shaolong himself, nobody can ever imagine Cao Qiudao losing a duel. The question is: Can Xiang Shaolong survive this catastrophe?

This carriage is especially wide and the seats are constructed near the tail end of the carriage. Due to the extra room, up to four men can sit side by side. As Xiang Shaolong is the main character for tonight, he could not reject and naturally had to sit in between Tian Jian and Lu Buwei.

In the recent years, it is rare for him to be so intimate with this great nemesis Lu Buwei. Feeling completely out of place, Xiang Shaolong prayed for the journey to end as quickly as possible.

He firstly congratulated Tian Jian for becoming the new Crown Prince and Tian Jian was chortling so cheerfully he could not keep his mouth closed. Lu Buwei interrupted: "Earlier on, Prince and I were discussing the best way to rule

a State. Prince mentioned Guan Zhong's Book of People Governance and singled out the theory of: Through Education, everyone will know the laws; Well-fed and well-cloth, everyone is aware of glory and shame. This is a sign of true wisdom. With Prince Jian succeeding the throne, the prosperity of Qi is something we can anticipate."

Tian Jian is overwhelmed with happiness. He articulated: "A well-managed country is always prosperous while an ill-managed state will always remain poor. As every good king should know, we must first enrich the population before exercising our rule over them."

Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask: "How does Prince plan to enrich the population?"

After a short spell of silence, Tian Jian pondered: "A strong army and a rich State is inseparable. Without a strong army, the State is insecure. Without a rich State, the army cannot grow strong. This is an ageless truth."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself, recognizing that he did not have a good method to offer. By blindly regurgitating Guan Zi's theory, it is just empty talk.

Although the time he spent in Lin Zi is limited, just by observing the existence of people like Zongsun Long, he can deduce that while Qi appears to be thriving, there is a huge divide between the rich and the poor. This is because the King has allowed members of the royal family to join hands with unscrupulous businessmen in setting up shady industries. Every day, they are competing with one another

to open up gambling dens, brothels or loansharking companies. In addition, due to a lack of ordinary schools, the education level of the population is not unanimous, leading to this income disparity as well. However, Tian Jian chose to ignore this glaring truth and make baseless comments such as building a strong army and enriching the population. He is making a joke out of himself.

Xiao Pan is far more successful than the other Kings because he is able to understand the sentiments of the population. With the brilliant advisor Li Si assisting him, his policies are practical and are not based on some empty debate.

Going all out to flatter, Lu Buwei praised: "Crown Prince's assessment is not inferior to Guan Zhong or Qi Heng!"

Despite expressing modesty, Tian Jian is thrilled and accepted the praise wholeheartedly.

At this juncture, they are almost reaching the city gates and the crowds here are significantly thicker. Someone shouted out in a loud voice: "Grandmaster Cao will win! Grandmaster Cao will win!"

Within a short span of time, everybody caught on and began cheering wildly. With thousands of Qi citizens shouting simultaneously, it was an intimidating scene.

Revealing an unnatural expression on his face, Tian Jian kept his silence.

Lu Buwei secretly observed Xiang Shaolong's countenance and noticing that his facial expression is as calm as a mirror, he grinned: "Shaolong, your nerves are like steel."

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused.

This is exactly like a soccer team playing in an AWAY match. The host had gained the home ground advantage. If they could not withstand the sounds of booing, they would have lost the match before it even begun.

With a smile, he pointed: "If a swordsman's fighting spirit is easily affected by external factors, how can he even qualify for the duel?"

Rolling his eyes, Lu Buwei acted as if he had forgotten something and suddenly remembered it. He articulated: "I nearly forgot to tell Shaolong something. After discussing with Empress and Little Ai, I have sent my men to look for that Handan couple who raised Crown Prince. I wish to invite them to Xianyang and allow them to retire without any worries. If everything goes according to plan, they should be in Xianyang by now!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his hatred rising, knowing that Lu Buwei intentionally revealed this matter at this point in time to cause disarray to his mental state, hoping to distract and add to his worries, causing him to be unable to focus on handling Cao Qiudao's saintly swordplay. There is no other scheme as ruthless as this.

Fortunately, Zongsun Xuanhua had told him about this matter when he was testing his reaction. Otherwise, this

abrupt input which tallies with his speculation may really cause him to lose his bearings.

Tian Jian became more alert upon hearing this. In the past, someone must have brought this to his attention.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and declared: "I am sure Imperial Uncle did not communicate this intention to Crown Prince."

Lu Buwei loudly chuckled: "It is Empress and my objective to give Crown Prince a surprise. That is why we kept him in the dark."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "If Imperial Uncle had consulted Crown Prince, you could have saved the effort. A long time ago, Crown Prince Zheng has already fetched that couple back to Xianyang. Regarding this matter, he kept a low profile so even Empress has no idea!" This time round, it is Lu Buwei who had a drastic change of countenance and was fidgeting with suspicions.

Among the cackling of firecrackers, the convoy drove out of the city gates.

Li Yuan, Han Chuang, Guo Kai, Xu Yizhe, Lord Longyang, Zongsun Long father and son, Min Tingzhang and a group of Qi officials were already gathered at a piece of barren land outside the city gates, forming a send-off party.

The carriage came to a halt.

Xiang Shaolong got off the carriage first and received the blessings of the crowd. The officials of Qi would naturally avoid phrases such: A speedy victory or A successful combat.

After entertaining the crowd for a while, Xiang Shaolong rode towards Qixia College with Zongsun Xuanhua and Min Tingzhang accompanying him. Bearing lanterns to illuminate the way, eight other swordsmen dressed in warrior suits escorted them from the front and back.

With a solemn tone, Zongsun Xuanhua explained: "After escorting Great General into Qixia College, we have to return to the city at once, for the Great King has issued a strict decree according to the wishes of Master. Only when Master releases a fire arrow can we come back to Qixia College for a look."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Are you saying that there is nobody else at Qixia College beside Grandmaster Cao?"

On the other side, Min Tingzhang answered: "Exactly. According to esteemed Master, he made this special request because he is concerned that with a live audience, they would definitely cheer for him and affect Great General's fighting spirit. Judging from the earlier scene, I guess Master's consideration is not unwarranted."

At this juncture, they have travelled to a ground of higher elevation. Entering their sights was Qixia College. Besides lanterns hanging at the main door and some illumination at the southeast corner, the entire area is completely dark.

With his horsewhip, Zongsun Xuanhua pointed to the lighted area that was further away and informed: "That is Stargazing Platform. It is situated at an open square besides the East entrance and stands at three stories high. At the tip of it is a flat stage two hundred feet wide. Master will be waiting there respectfully for Great General's arrival."

His gaze focusing on the area that the lanterns are shining down on, Xiang Shaolong suddenly recalled Lord Longyang's words.

If the fight didn't turn out in his favour, he should just run for his life.

CHAPTER 11

Displaying All Talent

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIANG SHAOLONG flipped off the horse and started walking on a path leading into the snowy forest.

Recounting Cao Qiudao's innate mutant abilities, Xiang Shaolong has noticed his ability to walk energetically despite passing the age of forty. To flee away from him during a losing match is not going to be an easy task.

Furthermore, while fighting high up at the tall platform, it is not convenient to simply start running away. If Cao Quidao

chooses to block the path leading down from the platform, it is as good as a cage fight.

Pondering on this, he had a brainwave. Since there is about an hour until the time of the duel, and with Cao Quidao as his senior who has a strong emphasis on status, he would definitely not be 'respectfully waiting' as per Zongsun Xuanhua's description. Therefore, he should have some time to reconnaissance the area and even arrange certain preparations.

He hurriedly injected more speed into his pace and tunneled through the forest via the footpath. A whitewashed and majestic platform that resembles Henggong Platform appeared in front of his eyes.

Since he has a plan in mind, he acted without the least hesitation and ran up the long flight of stairs on the north side of the platform within one breath. Except for the northern edge, the remaining perimeter of the platform top was lined with stone hedges and every ten feet, a metal pole would protrude out of the hedge and would be having a lantern or a flag hanging at the top. Under the illumination of the lanterns, the platform is as bright as day.

Noting the absence of Cao Quidao, he heaved a sigh of relief. Walking over to the stone hedge opposite the stone steps leading to the top of the platform, he removed his usual climbing rope and let it down towards the ground. Although the rope ends about ten feet away from the ground, based

on his skills as a Special Forces member and with his waist hook, sliding down is a piece of cake.

Securing the other end of the rope to a section of the stone hedge, he camouflaged the area before sitting down in lotus position. Regulating his breathing, he entered a deep meditation state where both the outer world and the inner world cease to exist.

The sound of footsteps forming a peculiar rhythm jolted him out of his meditation. Opening his eyes, the first thing that came to his attention was millions of stars occupying the cloudless sky.

Xiang Shaolong was startled as he failed to notice this wondrous astronomy spectacle when he first arrived. With his mind currently cleared of distractions, he was moved by the captivating night sky.

He thought: Humans and events are ever-changing but the universe will exist forever. If everyone can recognize this fact, countless unnecessary wars can be avoided.

At this point in time, the silhouette of Cao Qiudao's massive frame gradually emerged near the stairs.

Getting on his feet, Xiang Shaolong clasped his hands together as a form of respect.

With his long hair spreading over his shoulders as usual, Cao Qiudao is now wearing a grey warrior suit with wide sleeves that resembles wings, causing his already-substantial body build to appear even more tall and intimidating.

Cao Qiudao returned the greetings: "The last round, I had a taste of Great General's excellent skills, leaving me with the fondest memories. Tonight, I implore Great General to not be stingy about displaying your skills."

Xiang Shaolong let out a long laugh: "I am someone who had succumbed to the sword of Grandmaster Cao; I am not worthy of these brave-sounding words. I beseech Grandmaster Cao to show mercy to me."

His expression as icy as the frosty snow and not revealing any traces of his emotions, Cao Qiudao calmly reasoned: "The one who has lost the fight is me instead. That fateful night, Great General is not using your most adept weapon. I have just lucky to be able to defeat Great General."

Xiang Shaolong is baffled. Judging from his tone, Cao Qiudao sounded as if he is unable to defeat Xiang Shaolong within ten strokes. Is he planning a friendly match? In a solemn manner, Cao Qiudao added: "Once my sword leaves its sheathe, I never show mercy and will fight as if it is a life and death situation. Only by fighting in this fashion can a swordsman express the necessary respect towards his sword. Does Great General have a name for your sabre?"

Breathing in deeply and raising his heroic spirit, Xiang Shaolong retrieved Hundred Battle Sabre from his waist. With his left hand holding the scabbard and the right hand holding the sabre handle, he smiled: "The Sabre is named Hundred Battle. Awaiting instructions from Grandmaster Cao."

Staring intently at the sabre in his hand, Cao Qiudao nodded his head in succession. He plainly state: "For the past ten years, except for one man, nobody else can stand in front of me without the slightest waver. A worthy adversary is priceless. Does Great General understand the exhilaration in my heart?"

JIANG! The long sword is now in his hand.

Xiang Shaolong is confident that the man he was talking about is Guan Zhongxie's master, a superb swordsman whose name contained the word Zhai. He himself has totally forgotten the full name and wondered if their duel was also held at night. Reminded that it was a night fight, he suddenly had an inspiration and glanced at his scabbard.

Stroking the edge of the sword with a finger, Cao Qiudao alerted in a low voice: "This sword is personally forged by me and it is named: Executioner (of) General. Great General be forewarned."

With a trick up his sleeve, Xiang Shaolong remained motionless and simply requested: "Grandmaster Cao, please make the first move."

Facing the sky and laughing loudly, Cao Qiudao chuckled: "Well, someone has to attack first. Watch it!"

As the words 'Watch it!' rang out, the entire platform is instantly stifled with a gruesome and murderous aura. It looks like impact is imminent.

Cao Qiudao is already pressing towards him and when his boots hit the ground and produced 'sha sha' noises, they cumulated into an overbearing stance and it is hair-raising to the max.

Xiang Shaolong consolidated his focus and pinned all his attention on this opponent.

He acknowledged that Cao Qiudao will try to score a victory within a few strokes. As a result, repelling these ten strokes is not going to be an easy task.

The last round, he had the advantage due to his unique weapon. However, his opponent is, after all, a martial arts grandmaster. With their previous exchange, he probably comprehended his sabre play and would not be handicapped like before.

Xiang Shaolong was not complacent when he allowed Cao Qiudao to make the first move. It was because he had a brilliant scheme.

To someone like him who comes from the 21st century, a battle strategy is more important than anything else. If he can win through intellect, he would not resort to force or mindless bashing.

Cao Qiudao's footwork is awesome and full of intricacies, causing Xiang Shaolong some confusion in estimating his advancing speed and time.

Xiang Shaolong's mind became as calm as still water and entered a realm of clarity. With the absence of happiness and sorrow; past and future, his mind is now free.

Out of the blue, Cao Qiudao increased his speed and pressure. With Executioner manifesting into a huge burst of sword flashes, the actual sword suddenly materialized into a horizontal slash at the speed of lightning. It was an astounding and unmatchable strike.

Xiang Shaolong can sense the opponent's Executioner somewhat sealing all possibilities of an attack route by his Hundred Battle Sabre and Scabbard, leaving blocking as the only option.

He already had a taste of Cao Qiudao's incredible strength. If he forcefully parried the incoming blow which carried the full strength of his opponent, it would be a miracle if the centre of his palm can remain un-fractured. Needless to say, the fight will be over.

Nonetheless, he did not experience a single tinge of fear. By tilting the angle of the scabbard, the scabbard reflected the lantern's light into the eyes of Cao Qiudao.

Just like Cao Qiudao who displayed a spread of sword brilliance in order to confuse him, Xiang Shaolong is achieving the same effect by using the scabbard to reflect light.

However, the effort put in by both parties varies by a large extent.

By just twisting his hand, Xiang Shaolong has accomplished his motive.

No matter how superb is his swordsmanship, Cao Qiudao is still an ordinary man made up of flesh and blood. He is outstanding because he possess more swordfighting talent compared other people and is able to harness his potential at a deeper dimension.

As the light of the lantern fire penetrated his eyes, Cao Qiudao unconsciously squinted as his eyes could not withstand the abrupt increase in brightness compared to the level of lighting on the platform that they are used to. For a brief moment, he was blinded.

Although the spilt second is insufficient for Xiang Shaolong to overcome his enemy and gain victory, it is more than enough for him to avoid this maelstrom attack and unblockable strike. Concurrently, he grabbed the initiative and counterattacked, destroying Cao Qiudao's strategy to attain victory within a few strokes and severely disrupting his brimming confidence at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong skirted to the weakest spot of Executioner and firstly utilized the scabbard to deflect the enemy's sword. Simultaneously, he swiftly chop down with Hundred Battle Sabre in his right hand

DANG! A loud clashing sound filled the air.

Twisting his sword and nearly causing Xiang Shaolong to lose his grip on the scabbard, Cao Qiudao could retract his sword in time and parried his Hundred Battle Sabre.

Cao Qiudao may have successfully defended against Xiang Shaolong mountain-crushing attack but he could sense that something is amiss. He intended to shift aside to regain his momentum in order to grasp the initiative once again. But before he could react, Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battle Sabre has begun its wave of attacks.

With every sabre chop, it was perfectly matched with his amazing footwork.

The angle and strength applied in each strike is different, varying between light and heavy blows. Mainly engaging in chopping attacks, the moveset comprises of unfathomable entangling, sticky and slow variations, unleashing the full unique potential of the sabre.

Alarmingly, every blow is delivered without the slightest reservations and is fixated at maintaining the hard-won initiative. The chops are relentless and Xiang Shaolong appears to be fighting with complete disregard for his life.

This is exactly the strategy that Xiang Shaolong has chosen to employ a long time ago, banking on his youth against Cao Qiudao's matured years. He plotted to exhaust Cao Qiudao's stamina as soon as possible and prevent him from manipulating the fight within the ten strokes, which was what happened during their initial encounter.

When they first fought, Xiang Shaolong was in constant fear of Cao Quidao's aura and was at a disadvantage. This time round, he is deploying a ruse to weaken Cao Qiudao's aura and putting him at a disadvantage instead.

For someone of Cao Qiudao's caliber, any handicap will only be temporary. When confronted by Xiang Shaolong's three successive chops, he dodged to the left and right accordingly. While receiving the fourth chop, he discovered an opening within the sabre strike and used this opportunity to counterattack. When his sword is about to pierce Xiang Shaolong, the attack was deflected by his scabbard. Continuing the momentum, the sabre formulate into a low attack, forcing Cao Qiudao to retrieve his sword to block, resulting in a stalemate.

His eyes blazing with a cold sensation, it appears that Cao Qiudao is getting angry for the first time. With his tongue and throat growling like thunder, he released a rumbling roar. Parrying the offensive scabbard, he slashed down at a vacant spot.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling bewildered at his move, Cao Qiudao's Executioner sword has changed its sword path halfway, with a top slash evolving into a frontal whisk. As if it has a life of its own, Executioner was stabbing towards his throat in a flash. This sword move is absolutely mind-blowing and simply unbelievable.

Xiang Shaolong tilted his scabbard and made use of the reflection of the gemstones on the scabbard to once again refract light into Cao Qiudao's deadly eyes.

By the time Cao Qiudao realized he is slicing empty air, Xiang Shaolong has darted to his left side. Flexing his arm, he delivered another three chops.

Cao Qiudao stepped sideways to evade and served a circle of sword flashes in return. The circumference of the circle happened to clash with Xiang Shaolong's first chop.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the centre of his palm shaking violently, acknowledging that his opponent has picked up his moves and is negating his attacks in a better way.

DANG! DANG! Xiang Shaolong has successfully chopped twice on the same spot of the opponent's sword and wanted to repeat his feat by striking the same spot a third time. However, contrary to his desire, it failed to materialize.

Nevertheless, eight strokes have been exchanged.

Only two strokes remain.

Although the fight is not turning out in his favour, Cao Qiudao's aura is as steadfast and unyielding as usual. Till now, Xiang Shaolong cannot detect any weakness that he could exploit.

Out of a sudden, Cao Qiudao began spinning on the spot. Like a porcupine with its back full of spikes, he is radiating with countless sword flashes instead as he approached Xiang Shaolong like a swirling tornado.

Xiang Shaolong instantly knew that he cannot relent from this attack, otherwise, he would certainly lose within the next two moves.

In the same instance, he discarded all his sabre skills and strategies from his mind. As Cao Qiudao is spinning at an inconceivable speed, using the scabbard to reflect light into

his eyes is now inapplicable. Xiang Shaolong can only rely on his genuine ability and sharp instincts to repulse this unrivalled sword stance.

Resembling a hare and a crane crossing paths, the two men brushed past each other. In the blink of an eye, two strokes were exchanged.

A trail of blood appeared on Xiang Shaolong's left arm after Executioner carved a two-inch blood scar. Luckily, it is a minute flesh wound.

On the other hand, his Hundred Battle Sabre has neatly sliced off a portion of Cao Qiudao's flying hair due to his spinning motion. In the space between the two men, the hair gently flew in a scattered manner due to the wind and progressively landed on the ground.

Cao Qiudao was drastically stunned. Halting the fight, he laughed boisterously: "That's a fine sabre indeed. I have yet to face such an gratifying weapon."

Assuming that the duel is over, Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: "I am truly not Senior's match. Now that the ten strokes are over, we can call it a day!"

His two eyes blazing with fury, Cao Qiudao coldly grunted: "You must be joking. What ten strokes are you blabbering about? Great General is the number one enemy of our Eastern States. Do you think that I, Cao Qiudao, will allow you leave this place alive?"

Xiang Shaolong fell into a daze as his original respect for Cao Qiudao dissipated into thin air, cursing him for being a despicable cad who does not honour his agreements and is certainly not worthy of the title of Sword Saint.

However, now is not the time for deep contemplation. With a flicker of his silhouette, Cao Qiudao has transformed into a new attacking stance and is bearing down on him expeditiously like a tsunami wave.

Xiang Shaolong maneuvered Hundred Battle Sabre around himself and barely managed to parry three sword strikes from Cao Qiudao within a fraction of a second. By the fourth strike, his arm is so badly shaken it is beginning to turn numb, causing his movement to become slightly sluggish. He therefore tried to use the scabbard in his left hand to block, fighting for a break to catch his breath. Unexpectedly, his reaction coincides with Cao Qiudao's anticipation. By Cao Qiudao twisting his sword to manifest an entangling move and coupled with the additional impact from his body making a half turn, Xiang Shaolong's injured left arm could no longer maintain its grip on the scabbard. The scabbard flew out of his hand and landed somewhere behind him.

In this life and death scenario, Xiang Shaolong unlocked his adrenaline and launched a downward slash, forcefully clashing with Cao Qiudao's sword that was making a horizontal stab at his unguarded left arm.

DANG! The clashing sound rang out in their ears. Cao Qiudao did not envisage Xiang Shaolong to execute this bizarre move in the face of danger and helplessly retreated.

He let out a long laughter: "Without the scabbard, let's see what other tricks do you have in your bag?"

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it is now either do or die. If he allows Cao Qiudao to unveil another string of attacks and grab the initiative, he would perish on this platform within the next ten strokes.

Without the slightest delay, he advanced so rapidly towards Cao Qiudao that his shadow could barely form a complete outline. In the same breath, he switched from a one-hand grip to a two-hand grip. Raising the sabre high above his head and with a dance-like footwork, he swiftly positioned a chop at the head of Cao Qiudao.

Cao Qiudao halted his retreat and icily snorted: "You are asking for death!" As he was brandishing his sword and leaning forward, Xiang Shaolong unpredictably leaped up and gathered all his strength, chopping down with all his might.

With gravity on his side and a two-hand grip on the sabre, his stance is invincible and the strength behind this blow is way above his usual limit.

Swishing through the air, Hundred Battle Sabre was humming a piercing sabre whistle that screeched through the atmosphere.

With Cao Qiudao's ability, he could easily retreat and avoid the onslaught. But this would injure his ego and only serve to increase Xiang Shaolong's dominating aura. Furthermore, it would be a huge challenge to suppress the increase in aura.

Gnashing his teeth, Cao Qiudao leapt up as well to receive the impact with his sword.

Two bright and crisp clashing sounds reverberate and echoed throughout the mountains and valleys, ringing at every corner of Qixia College.

Even Lu Buwei and company who are watching the fight from the top of the city wall a far distance away could hear them.

As a matter of fact, whenever the two men exchanged blows, the sounds of clashing between the sword and the sabre could be faintly discerned but none of the sounds are as clear and loud as these two.

The two men had switched places.

The panting noises of Cao Qiudao were picked up by Xiang Shaolong's ears.

Xiang Shaolong's weakening strategy is finally taking effect. Twirling around with Hundred Battle Sabre firmly grasped in his hands, he employed a rotating momentum and supplemented additional strength from his waist, ferociously discharging a slanted slash at Cao Qiudao from his left shoulder.

Judging from his countenance, Cao Qiudao is as emotionless as ever. Flourishing his sword to counter the sabre strike head on, he shifted to one side to reestablish his footing.

Beyond his anticipation, Xiang Shaolong is already trailing him like a shadow and powered a backhand thrust towards his back.

Cao Qiudao cannot imagine Xiang Shaolong to be capable of such a flabbergasting switch in stance. Demonstrating traces of perturbation for the first time, he was forced to retrieve his sword in order to deflect Hundred Battle Sabre.

Gaining the upper hand, Xiang Shaolong was devoid of mercy. Among his wild roars, his hands ceaselessly performed one strike after another, with every strike beginning from high above his head and ending in either a straight chop or a side slash. Despite knowing that Cao Qiudao is impregnable, at least he could force him into a purely defensive position.

DING! DANG! The sounds of clashing consistently invaded his eardrums.

Although Cao Qiudao is physically stronger than Xiang Shaolong, the gap between their strength is marginal. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is now using both his hands to wield the sabre. Besides the strength of his wrists and arms, the strength of his waist was added as well and his waist strength alone formed the main bulk of the force. Additionally, every attack is a downwards hack from the top. Simply put, every hit carries the impact of a devastating and

unstoppable avalanche, compelling Cao Qiudao to keep stepping back with each encounter.

The best part is, Xiang Shaolong intentionally kept a distance away from him. Ten strokes later, at least six strokes were inflicted near the tip of his sword, which also happens to be the weakest part of the sword.

This highlights the wisdom of Xiang Shaolong.

In terms of sword moves and intricacies, he is way below Cao Qiudao.

By engaging in wide hacks and giant chops, he is able to harness the advantages of the sabre while exposing the vulnerability of the sword.

Overwhelmed by the sabre strikes, Cao Qiudao could only maintain his defensive role.

But this strategy cannot be sustained in the long run.

Initially, every hit is able to force Cao Qiudao to take one step back but Cao Qiudao gradually improvise his defenses and regained his stability. It wasn't too long before Xiang Shaolong had to exert additional strength in order to push him back by another step.

With this in mind, Xiang Shaolong swiftly dealt three successive and all-out strikes when he noticed that Cao Qiudao is no longer retreating and is readying himself for a counterattack.

TING! A new sound is heard.

Executioner (of) General sword cannot withstand the blitzkrieg and a two-inch section of the sword tip finally broke off.

Having suffered immensely at Xiang Shaolong's continuous rampage, Cao Qiudao's enormous frame was vibrating aggressively. Erupting into a raging howl, he exercised his sword in a wild flurry of stabs. Forgetting that his sword tip was gone, even his furthest pierce was only able to touch the surface of Xiang Shaolong's shirt at the chest area, allowing Xiang Shaolong to escape death by the smallest of margins.

Feeling exhausted too, Xiang Shaolong quickly retreated and created a distance of thirty feet between the two of them. Behind him, his escape rope is merely five feet away.

Lowering his head and scrutinizing his precious sword, Cao Qiudao shook his head and sighed: "Even with a broken sword, it is good enough to take your life."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that due to his earlier frenzy, he has expended most of his energy and cannot recover his earlier vitality.

Of course he would not display his weakness on his face. Taking a deep breath, Xiang Shaolong warned: "Grandmaster Cao, please reconsider. Earlier, it is not impossible for me to conclude the fight with a lose-lose double KO scenario."

Cao Qiudao plainly remarked: "Using my life in exchange for Great General's life is a beneficial bargain."

Xiang Shaolong hinted with sarcasm: "But the decision lies with me, not Grandmaster Cao."

Cao Qiudao angrily grunted once and frostily laughed: "Do you think you can use mere words to agitate me? Let's see what else are you capable of."

Lifting his tip-less sword, he swings it around in a figure of eight and synchronously stepped forward, pressing towards Xiang Shaolong.

Flaunting his sabre and pointing it at Cao Qiudao, Xiang Shaolong regulated his breathing as he stepped further back.

As one man advances and the other man retreats, in the blink of an eye, Xiang Shaolong has arrived at the edge of the stone hedge.

Xiang Shaolong vociferously roared: "Hold it!"

Cao Qiudao was astounded: "What do you want?"

Cupping his hands and the sabre in front of him, Xiang Shaolong paid his respects: "Many thanks for Grandmaster Cao's pointers. Little Brother has to go."

Realizing his intention, Cao Qiudao wielded his sword and dashed forward.

With a somersault, Xiang Shaolong disappeared beyond the stone ledge.

CHAPTER 12

Safely Back At Xianyang

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE minute Xiang Shaolong touched the ground, he immediately plastered himself to a dark corner of the wall. He could hear Cao Qiudao's faint footsteps, guessing that he must have blown his top and is descending the stairs in pursuit.

Scanning his surroundings, he caught sight of his Hundred Battle Scabbard lying a short distance away from his feet. Hastily picking it up and tying the sabre to his back, he

exerted a huge amount of energy by climbing back to the top of the platform via the grappling rope.

Cao Qiudao is obviously no longer on top of the platform.

Prostrating on the floor, Xiang peeped down and observed Cao Qiudao running past the bottom of the platform. At the same time, he detected rustling of leaves and branches on his right and left, a sure sign of ambush. His assassins must be in a state of confusion after failing to discover his whereabouts.

He counted his blessings for the close shave. If he had logically walked away from the grappling rope, he would have stepped right into their trap.

His plan to return back to Stargazing Platform is a brilliant stratagem. Not only can he spy on the enemy deployment, he could take a breather and bandage his wound.

Minutes later, he abseiled down the southeastern corner of Stargazing Platform. Recovering his grappling hook and rope, he borrowed the cover of the vegetation and scampered to the south wall of Qixia College.

He is well versed with the surrounding terrain of Qixia College and is aware that a thick forest exists beyond the wall. The forest provides a favourable condition for his getaway.

By now, he has recuperated some of his stamina. While it is insufficient for a proper fight, it is more than enough for him to make his escape

Somersaulting over the high wall, he used this opportunity to shoot the fire arrow that was meant to signal Li Yuan to him.

Subsequently, he raced at full speed towards the predetermined point where Xiao Yuetan had left the snowboard.

This is a distraction ploy, intending to lure the enemy to the place where the arrow was fired. He wanted to mislead the enemy into believing that he was injured and immobile, and was forced to ask for reinforcements.

Running nonstop for a hundred feet, his knees suddenly buckled and Xiang Shaolong fell flat on his face.

It turned out that the ground is still covered with snow that runs a few feet deep, making it extremely arduous to walk. Though Xiang Shaolong is fitter than the average man, he just fought a strenuous duel and suffered an injury with major loss of blood a week ago. Unable to catch his breath, he was seeing stars for a few seconds before nearly blacking out.

The freezing snow splattered on his face reignited his senses. Glancing around, he saw total darkness everywhere.

Fortunately, far behind him, he could decipher the lantern light from Stargazing Platform. Like a lost sailor who has found his guiding lighthouse, he was pointed to the right direction.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to climb back to his feet and staggered along the snow to a nearby bush. Diving into the clump of greenery, he collapsed and sat down to rest.

The starry night is simply enchanting but Xiang Shaolong is in a state of panic. With his worn out and tired body, there is no room for appreciating these wonders.

Closing his eyes, he resisted the urge to pass out due to a lack of oxygen. Gritting his teeth, he strained to stay awake.

After much difficulty, he managed to harmonize his breathing. But when he opened his eyes, he instantly knew that he is in trouble.

Under the illumination of the bright moon and the twinkling stars, the footprints left by his staggering is completely visible. It was truly shocking to see the footprints accurately leading to his present location, clearly identifying his hideout to his pursuers.

At this juncture, he could barely keep himself from fainting. Standing up is totally out of the question.

Despite the chilling winter season, his entire body is covered with sweat.

His ears picked up the sound of footsteps approaching.

More than ten human silhouettes emerged at the edge of the dense forest several feet away. Moving their feet high and low to trespass the deep snow, they are advancing towards him.

By simply following his footprints, they can walk straight to his hiding spot.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it is game over for him as he watched the enemies come closer and closer while there is nothing he can do.

By just travelling another three hundred feet through a sparse forest, he would be able to reach the hill where the snowboard is hidden.

It is truly excruciating to lose at the edge of victory.

Even if he could force himself to start walking, the enemies would quickly catch up due to his feeble legs. He would rather reserve his strength to take out as many assassins as he could to vent the anger in his heart. With this notion, he untied the two flying daggers around his calf and hid them in his hands.

If not for the enemies' refusal to light a torch, they would have seen him by now.

The sound of hoof beats suddenly arose.

The assailants were taken aback.

A lone rider appeared out of nowhere and loudly bellowed: "Who are you people?"

Recognizing Cao Qiudao's voice, Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. Keeping his flying daggers, he tried standing up.

With Zerk! Zerk! sounds, the group of attackers unexpectedly started to shoot arrows at Cao Qiudao.

Cao Qiudao let out an angry snarl and unleashed a flurry of sword brilliance. Broken arrows rained down around him, demonstrating their uselessness against his skills.

Xiang Shaolong finally managed to regain his foothold and began jogging towards his prize.

Behind him, tragic cries filled the skies. Apparently, an incensed Cao Qiudao has embarked on a killing spree.

Baffled by his sudden burst of energy, Xiang Shaolong actually made it into the forest before collapsing again.

Noting the sounds of running and galloping all jumbled up, Xiang Shaolong deduced that the ambushers are running their lives in multiple directions.

Xiang Shaolong can finally put his mind at ease, thinking that with the enemy swordsmen running all over the place and leaving their footprints, his own 'virgin footprints' would not be as obvious as before. Lying prone on the ground for some time, he slowly got back on his feet before proceeding forward once again.

Out of the blue, hoof beats can be heard approaching towards his back.

Petrified, Xiang Shaolong squatted down behind a tree.

Within the sparse forest, it is pitch dark and it is not as open as the space outside. There is no fear of someone noticing his footprints.

It appears that in his rush, Cao Qiudao must have forgotten to bring his fire stick. Otherwise, now would be a good time to light a branch or a torch to see his way.

Xiang Shaolong dare not breathe loudly because in this instance, Cao Qiudao has arrived at the other side of the tree where he is hiding. Riding a horse, Cao Qiudao was panting heavily.

If this Sword Saint had travelled on foot instead of riding a horse, he would have collapsed beside the tree.

CHA!

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself, realizing that he had made a wrong guess, for this is the terrifying sound of the lighting of a fire stick.

Xiang Shaolong dared not waver. Pulling out a flying dagger, he leapt out and threw it towards the neck of Cao Qiudao's horse.

The horse uncontrollably neighed and broke out into a frenzy of jumps, throwing Cao Qiudao off its back. The fire stick flew out of his grasp and landed somewhere far away as the forest was enveloped in darkness once again.

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "You are trapped! Watch out for my flying dagger!" Sounds of a person rolling on the forest ground can be heard as a disconcerted Cao Qiudao scrambled to find a hiding place.

Aware that his ruse has succeeded, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly summoned his remaining energy and climbed towards his targeted hill as quietly as he can.

In terms of his stealth ninja skills, even ten Cao Qiudaos cannot match his agility.

Gradually recovering his strength, Xiang Shaolong has left the sparse forest and is presently scaling the eastern face of the slope. When he was about to reach the summit, Cao Qiudao's angry howls reverberated behind him.

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated. Picking up a ten kg rock that happened to be beside him, he weakly threw it towards Cao Qiudao who was hot in pursuit.

After flying for five feet, the rock simply landed on the slope and began rolling down.

Cao Qiudao dodged to a side and successfully avoided the rock. However, due to the wet and slippery slope, he stumbled and lost his balance. Rolling straight to the bottom of the slope, he was a pathetic sight.

Xiang Shaolong thought: It is high time you have a taste of dirt on your face. Continuing his ascent, he barely reached the top when a pair of beautifully crafted snowboard and snow skis entered his sight. Lying beside them is a neat and full backpack.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong dedicated his thanks to Xiao Yuetan and Heaven. Using all his muscles, he sprinted to his resources and swiftly inserted his feet into the leg openings

that Xiao Yuetan had fashioned with thick rope. It felt as if he was putting on a pair of tight fitting boots.

As Xiang Shaolong was slinging the haversack over his back, Cao Qiudao happened to appear behind him and he thundered: "Where do you think you are going?"

Standing up, Xiang Shaolong cheerfully laughed: "Back to Xianyang of course! Little Old Fella Qiudao, let's never meet again!"

Cao Qiudao is now only ten feet away from him. Arching his body and powerfully digging the ski pole into the snow, Xiang Shaolong propelled himself off the hilltop and zoomed down the slope like a gust of wind. When he turned his head back, he saw Cao Qiudao's massive frame standing in a daze at the top of the slope, losing all his desire to continue the chase.

Xiang Shaolong kept skiing as the wind whistled in his ears. In a matter of seconds, he is miles apart from the abandoned Cao Qiudao who is still surrounded by darkness.

In his heart, he was deliriously happy. Although his body is aching all over, his heart was singing a song that was either composed by Xie Ziyuan or Feng Fei, which he could not specifically recall.

Except for Xianyang, he does not hold any responsibilities towards anything or anyone.

Beneath the brightening sky, Xiang Shaolong bent over a stream and swallowed several mouthfuls of water. Feeling

much better, he sat down on a huge boulder beside the stream and opened up the backpack that Xiao Yuetan had prepared for him, wishing to obtain some food to fill his empty stomach.

Inside the backpack was a map with directions to Zhongmou and some money for travelling expenses. There were also food, clothing, medicine for wounds, fire starters, etc, showcasing Xiao Yuetan's thorough thinking in packing everything that he would need on this journey.

While opening the map, a roll of parchment was discovered. The parchment is filled with words and it was unsigned. It read: By the time Shaolong reads this letter, you should have defeated Cao Qiudao and safely left the boundaries of Lin Zi. Elder Brother has a secret that I can only reveal at this point in time. The ten strokes agreement between Shaolong and Cao Qiudao is something that I made up; that letter never reached Cao Qiudao. If not for this ploy, Shaolong would not dare to fight. If you chose to flee and skip the duel, the damage to your reputation is far worse than losing your life at the hands of Cao Qiudao. Shaolong would have lost the most critical factor in the campaign against Lu Buwei: Your confidence. In the heart of Crown Prince, you would no longer be the hero who chooses death over injustice. Of course Shaolong would not hold it against me if you are able to read this letter. Otherwise, there is nothing worth saying. Elder Brother would rather see you die under Cao Qiudao's sword than to be labeled as a coward and a weakling. See you soon.

Reading the letter, his whole head turned numb, not knowing whether to find it amusing or petrifying.

Actually, several loopholes have been spotted. For example, Xiao Yuetan is constantly reminding himself that Cao Qiudao may dishonor the ten-stroke agreement whenever they talked about it. In addition, he would be having a peculiar expression on his face.

It can be considered that Xiao Yuetan is using Xiang Shaolong's life as a gambling chip. Fortunately, he won.

Although he did not really defeat Cao Qiudao, at least he didn't lose the fight too.

Even Cao Qiudao had to admit that it is possible for them to end up in a double KO scenario.

Filling up his tummy, he took a nap before speeding along the stream in a southwesterly direction.

In the evening, he found himself a decent cave and started a fire to keep himself warm. After a good night's sleep, he would continue his journey the next morning. This soon became a standard routine and five days later, Xiang Shaolong found himself in the territory of Wei en route to Zhongmou.

At this juncture, he has arrived at the northern shore of the Yellow River where the river water is beginning to thaw. In his heart, he knew that by sailing up north the river, he would reached Zhongmou in a day's time.

Presently, his greatest concern is that Teng Yi and the others have retreated from Zhongmou. If this is true, he would have to continue his arduous journey to Xianyang itself and he may run out of provisions.

The fact is that snow is melting around him, leading to extreme temperatures that he finds unbearable despite piling on all his clothes. A person with a weaker constitution would surely fall ill.

In the middle of his worrying, three large ships were seen sailing against the sunset.

An agitated Xiang Shaolong prone himself behind a massive boulder and eyed the ship.

After identifying the flag on the main ship, Xiang Shaolong leapt out with delight. Standing on the most prominent rock he could find, he lighted his flare and began signaling the ship with Qin's military signal.

The Qin sailors on board the ship were instantly alerted and started crowding at the bow while shouting at him.

The three ships sluggishly drew closer to a part of the muddy riverbank that has a gentler gradient.

Xiang Shaolong was mad with joy, feeling like a wanderer who is seeing his relatives again after leaving his household since he was a kid. Kicking the snowboard away and discarding his ski poles, he ran towards the shore like a lunatic.

The first of the colossal ships is nearly reaching the shore. More than ten planks were lowered and pushed against the bank to prevent collision.

A crisp and powerful voice rang out from afar: "Shaolong, Shaolong, it is us!"

Xiang Shaolong was so shaken he fell flat on his face; he could recognize Teng Yi's familiar voice.

Beyond his wildest imagination, his ears also picked up the shrieking and crying sounds of Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi. Lord Changping is also shouting his name out loud.

An exhausted Xiang Shaolong kept his face buried in the mud. He was finally home.

Turning back, the enormous ships sailed against the current. In the main hall of the ship's hull, Xiang Shaolong has changed into a new set of clothes and is surrounded by everyone like a superstar celebrity.

Due to their pining for him, Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi have grown thinner. Till now, they are still smiling among their tear-ing, a picture of both happiness and sorrow.

Sipping the hot tea served by his wives, Xiang Shaolong faced Teng Yi and Lord Changping, articulating: "I finally understood the meaning of: Worlds apart. It did cross my mind that I would never see you guys again."

Throwing herself into his bosom, Zhao Zhi wept even harder, frightening Xiang Shaolong into consoling her with kind words.

Ji Yanran had better self-control than Zhao Zhi and had recomposed herself by now. In a melancholic tone, she updated: "We did consider committing suicide to prove our dedication to you. Fortunately, we heard about your arrival in Lin Zi and the entire family went crazy with delight. Yanran and Sister Qing cast aside our duties and seek an audience with Crown Prince, beseeching him to send a force to fetch you from Qi..." A restless Lord Changping interrupted: "The Crown Prince is more anxious than anyone else and immediately commanded Little Brother to drop everything at hand and depart for Lin Zi without delay. To our anguish, the trip was postponed because the river had turned into ice. Actually, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Otherwise, we may have missed each other and it would be a wasted trip."

Teng Yi added: "Although we received the report from Jing Village, there was still no sign of Third Brother and we feared for your safety."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "How are the others doing?"

Lord Changping replied: "We have come to an agreement with Zhao and our forces have retreated from Zhongmou. Presently, Jing Jun and Huan Qi are holding the fort at Tunliu. Shaolong's army has quelled the chaos caused by Pu Hu and ruffled the feathers of Zhao. Your accomplishments are admirable."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "If my accomplishments are truly admirable, Zhou Liang and my other brothers need not die in a foreign land."

Teng Yi reasoned in a deep voice: "Wars are made this way. Regardless of victory or defeat, injury and death is inevitable. Third Brother need not blame yourself. Aye, Li Mu is really formidable."

Lord Changping wondered: "Didn't Lu Buwei travel to Lin Zi as well? He probably did not know you were there too."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "The exact opposite is true. Not only did we drink wine at the same table, he even personally escorted me to my duel with Cao Qiudao."

The crowd went hysterical: "What?!"

Xiang Shaolong gave a detailed description of what transpired in Lin Zi, causing everybody present to be tongue tied and shocked beyond their senses.

Of course he did not divulge anything about Xiao Pan's identity crisis.

Her curiosity aroused by his story, Zhao Zhi forgot to cry but her body is still plastered to his chest. When she heard about the part that Shan Rou has settled down, she sat up and noisily wailed: "Why would Sister Rou get married and keep us in the dark?"

Xiang Shaolong quickly explained that Xie Ziyuan is an ideal partner and Shan Rou had made an excellent choice. However, Zhao Zhi remained doubtful.

Ji Yanran was inquired: "You didn't see Godfather around? He must have..."

Xiang Shaolong continued telling his amazing story with all the twists and turns. Once completed, he stretched his back and decided: "For the time being, all I wish for is a good night's rest. I hope to wake up and find myself already in Xianyang."

Xiang Shaolong has changed into a military uniform and is standing at the bow of the ship. Standing beside him are Lord Changping, Teng Yi and Jing Jun who joined them on the way back.

From afar, nearly a hundred battleships were lined alongside the river in an awe-inspiring formation.

Two hours later, they will dock at Xianyang.

The white, snow-covered environment is gradually being replaced by signs of the spring's arrival.

The fluttering clouds, the raging waters, the lush greenery of willow trees that lined the two sides of the shore.

Staring intently at a long-tailed blue bird that was eventually startled by his passing ship, he recalled the months of living life as a fugitive, which is in total contrast to his current state. With the limitless ocean and sky for him to roam free, he feels like an un-caged bird.

The only issue plaguing him is: What is the outcome of Xiao Pan's identity crisis?

Xiang Shaolong used this break to question: "Recently, are there any major developments?"

Lord Changping answered: "The King of Han just passed away and he is succeeded by Prince An, who subsequently sent a peace emissary to us. In return, Crown Prince has asked Han's King An for Han Fei to come over to Qin. Han's King An has yet to give us a reply."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Crown Prince has always shown his appreciation for Brother Han Fei's theories of governance. If Brother Han Fei can put his talents to good use in Qin, that would be a good thing."

Ji Yanran sighed with a breath instead but kept her silence.

Xiang Shaolong pressed him for more details. Lord Changping suppressed his voice and added: "The Empress favours Lao Ai even more than before and promoted him to become Marquis Changxin. After the promotion, Lao Ai shares the same rank and salary as Lu Buwei, causing him to behave in an arrogant and insufferable manner."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: This is the year of Xiao Pan's coronation and it will mark the end of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. It is just too bad that the two of them have no idea about what's coming.

Quietly pondering on this, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Zhu Ji and Lao Ai are even closer to each other because of two reasons.

Firstly, Zhu Ji is suspecting that Xiao Pan is not her real son; secondly, she thought Xiang Shaolong is dead.

Be it mentally or biologically, Zhu Ji does require a man to fulfill her needs.

Jing Jun jested: "Now that Third Brother is returning to Xianyang in one piece, I bet some people will be pretty disappointed."

Zhao Zhi cheerfully added: "Hubby has been away for nearly two years. You would be surprised at how much Bao'er has grown!"

Ji Yanran joyfully chirped: "If not for Bao'er, Sister Wu would surely join our expedition. Little Zhen and Little Feng are unable to come along too and because of this, they did weep for several days."

Xiang Shaolong made enquiries about Wang Jian.

Lord Changping whispered: "Let's talk about it after meeting Crown Prince!"

As Xiang Shaolong glanced at Lord Changping with astonishment, the latter winked at him, forcing Xiang Shaolong to bear with the temporary ignorance.

Xiang Shaolong longingly exclaimed: "I am finally home!"

Xiao Pan has received news of his homecoming and personally left the city to welcome him.

This future Qin Shihuang is finally a grown man and even kept a short beard. With a broad chest and thick back, his

every gesture carries the aura of an earth-shattering Emperor. At his first glance, Xiang Shaolong had the impression that he is facing a total stranger.

Lord Changwen, Li Si, Guan Zhongxie, Wu Tingfang, Qin Qing and several high-ranking officials are in full attendance, leading to a lively and grand atmosphere. Lao Ai, however, is missing.

Among the booming drums, cackling of firecrackers and music playing, Xiang Shaolong disembarked his ship and step onto shore under the escort of his companions.

Taking the lead, Xiao Pan stepped out and supported Xiang Shaolong who had kneeled down to pay his respects. Scrutinizing his skinny complexion, he sighed: "It has been hard on Great General!"

Within Xiang Shaolong arose a bizarre feeling; it is as if their previous intimacy is gone with the wind.

Besides Xiao Pan not displaying sufficient agitation at seeing him again after so long, Xiao Pan's eyes seemed to be concealing something he could not decipher.

The other officials separately came up to offer their congratulations.

Without any reservations, Wu Tingfang leapt into his bosom. Qin Qing obviously could not do the same thing in front of the public. However, her eyes are blazing with passion, setting Xiang Shaolong's heart aflame.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong are riding side by side, receiving the cheers of Qin citizens who have lined up both sides of the street to welcome him. Xiao Pan grinned: "After we received news of Great General's disappearance, every household began praying to Heaven, wishing for Great General's safety and successful return. Their wishes have finally come true."

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to tell him about Lu Buwei's grand scheme but realizes that it is inappropriate to discuss this top secret at this point in time. Holding back his words, he questioned instead: "Is Lu Buwei back?"

Xiao Pan icily smiled: "Of course he must rush back to Xianyang before Great General. Great General's duel at Lin Zi is truly spectacular and has achieved the utmost glory for our Great Qin. After you left, Cao Qiudao personally begged the King of Qi for pardon, admitting that he is unable to overcome you. Is Great General aware that once the King of Qi hears about this, he was so upset he fell sick that very day."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Since Lu Buwei is back, then... Aye, Let's continue talking in the palace!"

The corner of his mouth revealing a deep and unfathomable smirk, Xiao Pan waved in response to the crowd's cheering as he plainly state: "Everything is under my control; let's talk later!"

Xiang Shaolong is having that bizarre sensation once again.

In a matter of two years, Xiao Pan's prowess has increased significantly and is even more unpredictable. It is totally opposite from the past when he was a kid and he would plead 'Master, save me'.

Back in the palace, they conducted a military parade inspection at the main square before Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan retreated to the Imperial Study for a secret discussion.

When the topic of Handan's Zhang couple surfaced, Xiao Pan's royal eyes glowed chillingly as he cursed: "How dare he. This traitor actually had the audacity to leak this information to outsiders. Even if he dies ten thousand times, he cannot atone for this crime."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Crown Prince is behaving as if you are prepared for this."

Xiao Pan sniggered: "Lest you forget, I have planted Mao Jiao the spy within Traitor Lao's camp. His every move cannot escape my detection."

Feeling an enormous weight lifted off his shoulders, Xiang Shaolong was elated: "Crown Prince must have executed some countermeasures."

Xiao Pan proudly declared: "If I sent my men to Handan after receiving this information, it would be too late. Fortunately, years ago, I did consider this issue and have resolved it."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sense of overwhelming fear. In a deep voice, he questioned: "Why didn't Crown Prince tell me about it?"

Avoiding his stare, Xiao Pan simply brushed off: "Back then, Great General was far away from Qin and it must have slipped my mind."

Xiang Shaolong continued to probe: "How did Crown Prince deal with that couple?"

Showing signs of impatience, Xiao Pan remarked: "Of course I rewarded them with plenty of money and relocated them to another place, preventing anyone else from finding them."

Xiang Shaolong's sixth sense told him that Xiao Pan is lying but if he continues to pursue the matter, it would only increase the unhappiness between the two of them. Thus, he kept quiet.

It soon led to an awkward silence.

After some time, Xiao Pan broke the silence and sighed with a breath: "Is Master upset?"

This 'long-awaited' word 'master' caused Xiang Shaolong's heart to soften. With considerable agitation, he expressed: "You have changed a lot."

With his dominating and sharp eyes turning to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan looked at him in the eyes briefly before nodding: "I cannot afford to remain the same. To maintain

my seat on this throne, I definitely must make the change. But to Great General, I am always a kid.”

Pausing, he asked after much difficulty: “Except for Great General, is there anyone else who knows about this secret of mine?”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that he has always wanted to ask this question but could only ask given the present circumstances.

After a quick thought, he replied: “Except for Tingfang, not a third person knows about this.”

Of course he would not reveal Teng Yi’s awareness.

Exhaling a breath of air, Xiao Pan leaned back on his throne. Raising his head and staring at the ceiling beams, he gently painted: “Bad news travel faster than good news. With rumours flying all over the place, they better not let me hear about it. Otherwise, not only will I kill him regardless of his status, I will also exterminate his clan. Let’s see who else would dare to bring this up. Hng, Lu Buwei, Lao Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly shocked. Although these words are not directed at him, it felt like Xiao Pan is hinting him, warning him not to disclose his secret to a third party. He instantly felt uneasy.

Without further explaining himself, Xiao Pan leaned forward and whispered: “I have secretly summoned Wang Jian back. He should arrive in Xianyang within two months.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "You meant you did not consult Empress about this?"

His eyes flashing with a chilling aura, Xiao Pan spat with disgust: "Since she no longer regards me as her son, why should I bother to consult her. At Yongdu, she behaves without any inhibitions and her relationship with Lao Ai is now an open secret. Under the skies, who is not regarding this as a joke? It has brought countless shame to our Great Qin."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he hates Zhu Ji for divulging the whereabouts of the Zhang couple. He sighed with a breath: "Crown Prince should remember what you have promised me."

He was referring to the promise that Xiao Pan would not harm Zhu Ji no matter what happens.

An incensed Xiao Pan glared at him and indignantly demanded: "Up till now, Great General is still speaking up for her?"

His own eyes brimming with an icy aura, Xiang Shaolong stared back at him and insisted: "Yes. After all, she did love you and supported you wholeheartedly and you also treated her as your real mother. If you had put yourself in her shoes, you should understand that the things she does do not benefit her at all. She is simply being human."

Xiao Pan appears to be slightly afraid of him and shifted his gaze away to the reports and documents that were piled on his desk. He quizzed: "Most of the reports here are more or

less related to Zhengguo Canal. Recently, I received news, saying that Zhengguo was in fact sent by the King of Han. What is Great General's opinion on this?"

Noting that Xiao Pan had deliberately changed the topic and refused to engage him with Zhu Ji's affairs, Xiang Shaolong suppressed his anger and replied in a deep voice: "Your subordinate is very tired and wishes to return home for a rest."

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath and bitterly smiled: "Grand Tutor is offended. There are many things I do not wish to do but at the back of my mind, I knew I had to do it. Grand Tutor should also try putting yourself in my shoes."

By using another official title to address Xiang Shaolong, he immediately increased the intimacy between the two of them.

His anger slightly mellowing, Xiang Shaolong formally asserted: "This July, Crown Prince will officially be crowned King. By then, all power would lay in your hands and Empress can no longer interfere with your decisions."

Sinking his face down, Xiao Pan slowly pronounced one word at a time: "Does Great General knows that that slut has given her seal of authority to Lao Ai, allowing him to use it at his disposal, causing me endless nights of trepidation?"

Xiao Pan has really transformed into a different person and his relationship with Zhu Ji is obviously beyond repair.

Otherwise, why would he use the term sl.ut to describe her, stunning Xiang Shaolong speechless.

PONG! Slamming his wide and thick palm heavily on the table, Xiao Pan gritted his teeth and cursed: "That sl.ut has bore two bast.ards for Lao Ai. One is named Lao Zheng and the other is named Lao Long. What does Great General think about this? If not for Traitor Lao and Lu Buwei in cahoots and posing a formidable threat, I would have tore him to pieces way before July."

Pausing for a while, Xiao Pan's furious expression slowly subsided. With mock amusement, he laughed: "Does Great General know that Lao Ai is labeling himself as my 'fake father' and even commented that my, this 'fake son', days are numbered and the coronation will not be mine but his. Ha. This fool can even dream with his eyes open. I can't wait to witness his terrifying demise."

Xiao Pan may be laughing as he articulated these words but the genuine hatred in his heart is what Xiang Shaolong finds bone-chilling.

Out of the blue, he felt extremely exhausted. Dealing with Xiao Pan is much more draining than dealing with Lu Buwei. How was he to know that this would happen after he decided to bring Xiao Pan to Xianyang?

VOLUME 25

CHAPTER 1

Unpredictable Xiao Pan

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

SURROUNDED by his buddies such as Li Si and Lord Changwen, Xiang Shaolong returned back to Wu Residence.

Seeing the Tian Sisters again, the three of them were ecstatic beyond words.

Xiang Bao'er just turned six and he is much stouter than the average kid. Clinging onto Xiang Shaolong, he asked one question after another and was pretty talkative, causing Xiang Shaolong to swell with fatherly pride.

Leading the entire clan, Wu Yingyuan prayed to their ancestors. That night, a banquet was hosted and the residence was decorated with numerous lanterns and red banners. It was a lively scene.

After drinking until his ears are red, Lord Changwen who was sitting opposite Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "The invincible Cao Qiudao is no longer invincible. After the duel at Qixia College Stargazing Platform, there is Shaolong the Sabre King who is evenly matched with Sword Saint. Let's see what else are the Six Eastern States capable of?"

At this juncture, Ji Yanran and Qin Qing led all the female members of the family in a toast, demonstrating their indebtedness for Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the other men who had served Qin by going into war. Xiang Shaolong and his men hurriedly returned the toast.

Noticing Zhou Wei, who had married Wu Guo, among the ladies, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of her brother Zhou Liang and King Eagle who died serving the country. He grieved: "At pity that Brother Zhou Liang..."

Zhou Wei's countenance turned grey. Lowering her head, she gently consoled: "Late Brother's greatest wish is to

successfully train a King Eagle and deploy it in battle, assisting the army in securing victory. Now that his dream has come true, he would have died without any regrets. Great General need not bear any grudges for his death is certainly a peaceful one.”

Finishing her sentence, her eyes began to turn reddish.

Everyone is conscious that Xiang Shaolong emphasizes a lot on relationships and hastily tried to change the topic. Jing Jun’s wife and the mother of their daughter, Lu Dan’er quizzed: “Is Great General staying in Xianyang or leaving for the farms?”

Li Si joked: “Madam Jing must be really forgetful. Others may address Shaolong as Great General but you should address him as Third Brother or Third Brother in law instead.”

The crowd breaking out into laughter, Lu Dan’er vented her anger on Jing Jun. Viciously glaring at him, she scolded in a low voice: “It’s all your fault!”

Her words triggered even more laughter and the entire hall was filled with happiness, effectively diluting the earlier ambience of sorrow.

At the end of the banquet, the guests bade farewell and subsequently took their leave.

After their departure, the leaders of the Wu Family gathered together in a secret room for a meeting.

During Xiang Shaolong's absence, all the external matters of the Wu Family were actually handled by the wise Ji Yanran. She inadvertently became the only female participant.

Tao Fang started the ball rolling: "It is wonderful to have Shaolong back. After several rendezvous with Tu Xian, it is ascertained that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were in cahoots and their apparent enmity is staged. Additionally, with Empress supporting them from behind, their prowess is significantly boosted. Due to Lu Buwei's incitement, Lao Ai is spending most of his time at Yongdu. His resident palace, clothing, carriages and lifestyle is comparable to that of a King. Moreover, any document that requires Empress's Seal of Authority will have to be vet by these two traitors.

Ji Yanran nodded: "Due to the influence of Empress, Yongdu is as good as the territory of Lao Ai. With Lu Buwei as an inactive partner, they are forming secret gangs that are made up of desperados from different States, preparing to create chaos during Crown Prince's July coronation. This is a troubling development."

Xiang Shaolong reassured: "Some time ago, Crown Prince has planted the capable Mao Jiao as a spy within Lao Ai's camp. Thus, he possesses full knowledge of his traitorous activities. Moreover, he has secretly summoned Wang Jian back to Xianyang and is preparing for a showdown with Lao Ai."

Teng Yi violently shuddered: "Now that Shaolong is back; why did he summon Wang Jian?"

Xiang Shaolong fell into a daze as this thought never crossed his mind. His own heart began to turn cold.

Everyone is now gazing at him.

Jing Jun wondered: "Since Crown Prince personally informed Third Brother about this, there shouldn't be a problem right?"

Her pretty eyes flashing with a complicated look, Ji Yanran melancholically sighed with a breath. She cautioned: "Whenever it comes to a power tussle or brothers fighting for the throne, all family ties are discarded. Hubby poses a threat because you are able to win the hearts of the people; just by witnessing the citizens of Qin celebrating your homecoming by cheering at the two sides of the street at your return, it is as clear as day."

Wu Guo furiously recapped: "If not for Young Master fighting hard and protecting this country, Crown Prince will not be who he is today. How can he..."

With a dry cough, Wu Yingyuan interrupted him: "Stop your nonsense. Wu Guo, you never learn your lesson, do you? After the ungrateful treatment by Zhao, you are still as naïve as ever. Right now, Shaolong is as good as another Bai Qi. Do you still remember how Bai Qi ended up!"

Pausing, he added: "Fortunately, years ago, we had already decided to move to the borders and build our own kingdom. We are at the last leg of our preparations. Once we kill Lu Buwei, we will leave Qin immediately. Shaolong shall be our overall chief in charge."

Tao Fang dryly coughed too: "Recently, there is an unknown group spreading rumours, asserting that Crown Prince is neither the son of the late king or Lu Buwei but someone Shaolong that Shaolong has secretly manifested. Hey, this is truly absurd." Glancing at Xiang Shaolong with a strange expression, Ji Yanran lowered her lovely face and her body language became unnatural. Teng Yi, who knows the real truth, wondered out loud: "Are the people convinced by these rumours?"

With a serious expression, Tao Fang professed: "Within Qin, unless they are having an ulterior motive, everyone believes that Crown Prince is the rightful and authentic son of heaven. These preposterous rumours cannot shake their beliefs. I am only concerned that this will cause Crown Prince some discomfort!"

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "As per Father in Law's comments, we, the Wu Family, can no longer allow our fate to be determined by other parties. We must hold the key to our own destiny." Following that, they analyzed several details on how to fully retreat from Qin before everyone retired to their bedrooms.

Ji Yanran instead pulled Xiang Shaolong to the garden for a stroll. This gorgeous beauty with matching intelligence quizzed: "Does Hubby feel that Crown Prince has changed a lot over the past two years?"

Admiring the bright moon, Xiang Shaolong sighed: "As the leader of a State, who can afford to stay stagnant?"

Ji Yanran praised: "Well said! Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Isn't this your famous warning mantra? Now that Crown Prince's authority is growing day by day, his character has become even more unfathomable and unpredictable. Aye! Li Si has changed a lot too and is no longer as close to our Wu Family as before. If Shaolong were to treat other people with the same frankness as before, it will be very easy for you to get cheated.

Xiang Shaolong was still in a daze when Ji Yanran lowered her head and confessed: "It was Tingfang who told us!"

Xiang Shaolong gawked at her with amazement.

With a wronged expression, Ji Yanran shot him a look and acknowledged: "Back then, we just received news about your defeat in battle and subsequent disappearance. In her anxiety, Tingfang told me about Crown Prince's secret and is certain that Crown Prince will do his best to save you because of it. Therefore, you should not blame her. Aye! I did not expect you to keep me, your wife, in the dark."

His face beginning to change colour, Xiang Shaolong demanded: "Who else knows about this?"

Ji Yanran replied: "Of course Zhi Zhi knows about it too but I have instructed her to keep it strictly confidential. Shaolong ah! If not for this matter, regardless of all the rumours, it will not affect the relationship between you and Crown Prince. However, it is an entirely different situation now. Shaolong cannot afford to let your guard down."

Shaolong nodded: "I appreciate Yanran's reminder. All along, I was mentally prepared for this. It's late. Let's return to our rooms and sleep!"

The next day, the three men Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun woke up before dawn in order to attend morning court. Arriving at the Court of Qin, Xiang Shaolong noticed Lu Buwei around and even Lao Ai had rushed over from Yongdu to be present. He instantly smelled a rat.

Spotting Xiang Shaolong, several officials come over to him and exchanged greetings. They were fidgeting restlessly, as if they wanted to say something but eventually chose to hold back.

Squeezing to the side of Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai pulled him to a corner for a private conversation. He commenced: "Empress and I are so worried after hearing that Shaolong met with a disaster."

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew that he is lying and cannot be bothered to expose him. Acting grateful, he thanked: "I appreciate Brother Lao's and Empress's concern."

Out of the blue, Lao Ai moved closer to him and whispered in a suppressed voice: "Over the past few months, there is an unknown group spreading rumours, claiming that Crown Prince is not the son of the late king but someone that Shaolong had created. As a result, I approached Empress to verify this. After further discussion, we decided to search for the couple from Handan who had raised Crown Prince and invite them to Xianyang in order to clear the air."

Putting up an air of indifference, Xiang Shaolong yawned: "And what's the outcome?"

His eyes glowing frostily, Lao Ai stared at Xiang Shaolong and continued: "We discovered that one and a half years ago, the Zhang Li couple and dozens of their neighbouring households were burnt to death in a huge fire. Regardless of age or gender, four hundred lives were lost and no one from that district survived the inferno. This case has taken Handan by the storm and is now classified as one of their mystery cases."

Xiang Shaolong's hands and feet instantly turned cold and his mind went blank. Momentarily, he did not know what to think or do or say.

Lao Ai's voice seemed to be reverberating from afar: "Earlier, I brought this up to Imperial Uncle and he mentioned that Shaolong told him about Crown Prince fetching the Zhang Li Couple back to Xianyang for a blissful retirement. But how did matters turned out like this?"

Even with his quick wits, Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Luckily, the court bell rang and the various officials hurriedly scampered to their seats. With a 'How strange!' reply, Xiang Shaolong hastily slipped away.

Perching high up on his dragon throne, Xiao Pan received the respects paid by his numerous civil and military officials. Xiang Shaolong is still in a state of apprehension as his mind is occupied with Lao Ai's earlier shocking revelation.

He did guess that Xiao Pan would murder the Zhang Li couple, as dead men tell no tales. But never in his wildest dreams would he expect the entire district to be burnt to the ground. From this episode, it clearly demonstrates Xiao Pan's ruthlessness in preserving his secret and Xiang Shaolong would not find it surprising if the arsonists are killed by Xiao Pan after their successful mission.

In the heart of Xiao Pan, only Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang know about his authentic background. Will he cast aside his gratitude towards them and seal their lips with death in order to tie up all the loose ends once and for all?

After being betrayed by his group of buddies in Lin Zi, Xiang Shaolong has gained a deeper understanding of human psychology.

Xiao Pan is definitely different.

Xiang Shaolong came to this conclusion as he witnessed Xiao Pan sitting on his dragon throne and glaring at his officials with a condescending attitude as he praised Xiang Shaolong for resolving the chaos caused by Pu Hu.

By his opening address for the morning court, Xiang Shaolong can tell that Xiao Pan has learnt the art of utilizing his dominance and the use of compliments to win the hearts and minds of his officials.

Following the speech, Lu Buwei presented his lengthy report about his Lin Zi trip. Halfway through, Xiao Pan gestured for him to stop. Frowning, he interrogated: "What kind of

person is Tian Jian? After his appointment, can Tian Dan maintain his hold on power?"

His long thesis being harshly disrupted by Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei's face revealed a look of annoyance. In a deep voice, he answered: "Tian Jian and Tian Dan are not worthy of our attention. Our only fear is an alliance between Qi and Chu. Tian Jian is able to secure the title of Crown Prince because the people of Chu are secretly backing him. Therefore, I..."

With an impatient tone, Xiao Pan interrupted him again: "Is Tian Jian an ambitious and striving person or is he another weakling who indulges in greed and pleasure?"

Xiang Shaolong is filled with admiration.

Xiao Pan has truly changed, changing to a man who seeks truth from facts and do not entertain empty talk. Based on his words, Xiao Pan gave everyone the impression that he is only interested in the stark reality.

Momentarily stunned, Lu Buwei frowned: "This matter requires further observation."

Shifting his gaze to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan's tone became gentle and respectful. He checked: "Can Great General solve this puzzle for Guaren(me, your ruler)?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. With just a few words from him, the fate of Qi would be sealed. And it would naturally comprise the fates of his beloved Shan Rou and his good friend Xie Ziyuan.

However, he could not avoid this question, especially during this period when his relationship with Xiao Pan is an ambiguous one. Inhaling a deep breath, he solemnly described: "Currently, Tian Jian can be considered as the acting King of Qi because he has the ultimate say in everything. Of course he would wish to accomplish something notable during his reign; however, he is deeply influenced by Qi's culture of empty talk and is blinded towards the pressing issues of the State. He is eager to maintain good ties with us and no longer possess the mindset of Henggong's 'Nine Marquis Collaboration to rule the world'."

Slapping the armrest of his dragon throne with considerable might, Xiao Pan sighed: "Great General's analysis had sufficed well. Where is my Chief Officer?"

Li Si muttered a reply and stepped forward. Holding his scepter, he kowtowed and proclaimed: "At your command!"

Xiao Pan decreed: "Proceed without delay. Get Guaren an eloquent speaker and select a troupe of pretty and talented song & dance courtesans. Send them to Lin Zi for Tian Jian as a form of congratulations for his new title of Crown Prince. At the same time, add some congratulatory words on Guaren's behalf."

Li Si accepted the assignment and returned to his seat.

Xiao Pan let out a long laughter: "Since the coming of Henggong, Qi and our Great Qin has always been locking horns with each other. The Three States, Chu and Yan are

either fighting alongside us against Qi or fighting us alongside Qi. This matter must come to a conclusion sooner or later. Of course we will only take them on after conquering the Three States and Chu.”

Under the leadership of Wang Wan, the officials of Qin broadcasted their endorsement.

Their faces frozen with terror, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai kept quiet.

Xiang Shaolong could comprehend the situation. Xiao Pan is intentionally showcasing his authority and foresight to the officials, reminding them who is the genuine ruler of Qin. Concurrently, he is publicly causing Lu Buwei to lose face, indirectly coercing him and Lao Ai to swell with rebellious thought.

At this juncture, Lu Buwei suddenly winked at Lao Ai who is sitting beside him and the latter consequently made a secret hand gesture at a civil official named Qian Zhi who was sitting several seats away.

Qian Zhi wavered on the spot for some time before stepping forward. He kowtowed and avowed: “Subordinate has something to report to Crown Prince.”

The Court instantly quietened.

Seated beside and one level higher than Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping leaned towards his ear and whispered: “He works for Lao Ai. Due to Empress’s backing, he rose from a lowly official to senior civil official within one promotion.”

With much tolerance, Xiao Pan calmly approved: "Official Qian, please speak!"

His lips trembled twice before Qian Zhi enunciated in a fearful voice: "Recently, there are rumours spreading around Xianyang which contains illogical nonsense that are aimed at damaging the prestige of Crown Prince. After subordinate's inspection, I established that these bewitching slanders to be rather detrimental and therefore, subordinate seeks Crown Prince's permission to conduct a investigation..."

Xiao Pan icily interrupted him: "What slanders are Official Qian referring to? Guaren does not comprehend."

His face swiftly drained of blood, Qian Zhi kneeled down on the floor and forcefully kowtowed, begging: "Subordinate dare not say it."

Xiao Pan heatedly bellowed: "You don't even have the guts to tell me the rumours; how can Guaren trust you to manage the affairs of the State?"

Sensing that the situation is becoming unfavourable, Lao Ai gave Lu Buwei a nudge.

A helpless Lu Buwei secretly cursed Qian Zhi's incompetence and dryly coughed once. When he was about to say something, Xiao Pan already hollered: "Nobody is allowed to speak up on behalf of this nincompoop. Quick, tell Guaren the truth about the rumours."

By now, Qian Zhi has kowtowed with so much strength that his head is broken and bloody. In a quivering voice, he

stammered: "The rumours claimed that Crown Prince is not the son of the late king... .. Subordinate deserves death."

Breaking out into laughter, Xian Pan derided: "I see."

His royal complexion darkening the next second, Xiao Pan resentfully admonished: "Rumours vanished in the presence of the wise. The six eastern States are terrified of us and intentionally generated this slander in order to defame Guaren. Qian Zhi, how dare you assume these rumours to be true and even claim that it is affecting our citizens?"

Qian Zhi was frightened out of his wits and tragically cried: "Subordinate did not believe these rumours. Subordinate... .."

Xiao Pan exploded: "Get this fool to the palace gate and behead him at once. His clansmen shall be conscripted to the border army and his clanswomen shall become prostitutes for the official brothels."

Under the horrified expression of the officials, a wretched Qian Zhi continued to beg nonstop for mercy as he was inhumanely dragged out by the fierce and emotionless palace guards of Lord Changwen, leaving only a pool of blood from his broken head at the centre of the Court.

The look on the faces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai is exceedingly dreadful.

Within the Court, one can hear a pin drop as everyone was flabbergasted at Xiao Pan's unpredictable illustration of authority.

In a few months time, Xiao Pan will officially be coronated as the King of Qin. No one would dare to offend him at this point in time.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the entire length of his spine tingling with fear.

Xiao Pan's makeover is truly overbearing.

Recomposing himself, Xiao Pan plainly questioned: "Now that these baseless rumours have found their way to our Court, what does Imperial Uncle think we should do to manage it?"

Lu Buwei has calmed down as well. In a deep voice, he suggested: "Crown Prince is right. Rumours vanished in the presence of the wise. By simply ignoring them, the slanders would eventually cease to exist."

Xiao Pan shook his head faintly, indicating his disagreement with Lu Buwei's proposal. To the crowd, he enquired: "Is there any other good recommendations from my officials?"

Seated at the side of Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping uttered: "Showtime."

Stepping forward, he advocated: "In subordinate's opinion, this matter must be swiftly nipped in the bud. I propose Crown Prince to issue a decree, forbidding our citizens to propagate this slander either publicly or privately. The clan of the offender shall share the same guilt and any whistle blowers shall be generously rewarded. These measures would certainly herald the end of these fabrications."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, recognizing that Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Changping and other intimate officials had secretly arranged for this scenario, planning to employ heavy-handed methods to quell these falsifications in a quick and efficacious manner.

Xiao Pan cheerfully granted: "Subordinate's proposition sits well with me. Guaren is due for coronation. Thus, whoever that discusses this issue, regardless of official post, will be deemed as troublemakers and will be beheaded without pardon."

Successively, he stridently thundered: "Court dismissed!"

The scores of officials briskly kneeled down on the floor, respectfully sending off this Crown Prince whose influence is rising rapidly.

After Xiao Pan's departure, Xiang Shaolong was about to leave when Lord Changping held him back, stating: "Crown Prince wishes to see you."

CHAPTER 2

Preparing For A Rainy Day

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

WITH his hands behind his back, Xiao Pan was standing in front of a large window in the study. With his back facing the door, Xiao Pan plainly state: "Guaren wishes to speak with Great General in private. The others can wait outside the door."

Li Si and Lord Changping obediently acknowledged his order and retreated from the room. Upon their exit, the attendant closed the study door at the back of Xiang Shaolong.

Without paying his respects, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly strode over to the back of Xiao Pan, enquiring in a low voice: "Is Crown Prince the mastermind behind the Great Fire of Handan which killed a few hundred people?"

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath of air: "Guaren didn't have a choice; otherwise, right now, it wouldn't be Guaren executing someone but someone executing the both of us."

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to counter him.

From a practical point of view, Xiao Pan's cruel method is indeed necessary and effective. Even he himself could not think of a better or cleaner way to wrap this up.

Xiang Shaolong felt directly responsible for the hundreds of lives lost.

If he did not get Xiao Pan to impersonate Yingzheng, perhaps this calamity can be avoided.

He is now deep-seated with regrets!

Maybe this is fate.

This is the first time he is feeling remorseful for personally grooming this one in a million Qin Shihuang.

Xiao Pan gently coaxed: "Presently, Master is my only kin. Please do not be upset with me. Without Great General's support, Guaren will be so lonely."

By addressing Xiang Shaolong and himself as Master and me, followed by Great General and Guaren, Xiao Pan has unconsciously generated an extremely dramatic effect.

Within that split second, Xiang Shaolong experienced Xiao Pan's astounding development from a mischievous kid to the earth-shattering Qin Shihuang, causing his mind to turn turbulent.

Activating his immense willpower to suppress his churning emotions, Xiang Shaolong openly declared: "Today, subordinate is here to say goodbye to Crown Prince. Later in the day, subordinate shall return back to the farms and await patiently for the coronation ceremony."

Xiao Pan violently quivered: "Till now, Great General is unable to comprehend Guaren's difficulties?"

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Why would I blame you? In fact, on the political stage, you have done much better compared to all the kings in the past. Under the sky, who can hold a candle to you?"

Exhaling a heavy breath of air, Xiao Pan turned around and his royal eyes were glowing with a never-seen-before aura. In a frantic tone, he insisted: "There is four months to go before I will be officially crowned. If Master is willing to forgive me, then please assist me in getting rid of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's factions."

His heart softening, Xiang Shaolong sighed: "With Wang Jian around, am I, Xiang Shaolong, still needed?"

The corner of his mouth curling to form an attractive and charming smile, Xiao Pan shook his head and clarified: "Master is mistaken. I summoned Wang Jian back because it is time to have him back anyway. Moreover, should Master

meet with misfortune in Qi, Guaren can instantly get Wang Jian to avenge Great General.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong explained: “Subordinate wishes to return to the farms because I wish to get some respite and also spend time with my wives and son. Crown Prince can refrain from thinking otherwise.”

Xiao Pan was amused: “In this world, only Great General has the guts to tell Guaren to refrain from thinking otherwise. If it was somebody else, he would not have the courage to say so.”

Subsequently, he interrogated with a serious demeanor: “Is Great General intending to migrate to the northern borderlands after Guaren’s coronation?”

Suspiciously eyeing the overbearing aura radiating from Xiao Pan’s royal eyes, Xiang Shaolong maintained in a deep voice: “This is subordinate’s greatest dream. Crown Prince had better not get in my way.”

Xiao Pan bitterly laughed: “Great General is the only person Guaren dare not offend. What else can Guaren say? For the time being, Guaren only has one request: I want you to get rid of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai for Guaren.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “All right! Subordinate shall return to Xianyang in one month’s time and begin preparing for a showdown with them.”

With Jing Jun and Teng Yi accompanying him, Xiang Shaolong rode to the top of the tallest hill overlooking the farms.

Varying his gaze from near to far, he relished in the scenery of Spring.

Wherever he looked, it was as beautiful as a painting. Camels, horses, cows and goats are roaming freely on the vast grasslands, contentedly consuming the bountiful, thick grass and clear water the fertile soil provides.

Slightly obscured by the thin mist that forms every dawn, the outline of the faraway mountains is faintly discernable. Coupled the rising and falling landscape of the nearby hills and valleys, on top of their lush greenery, it resembles some kind of 3D effect. Once a while, a waterfall is sighted in between the hills and their cascading water breathes even more life into the picturesque view.

Peering at a flock of birds flying across the horizon, Teng Yi sighed: "They are finally coming home."

Gazing at Ji Yanran, Lu Dan'er, Shan Lan and the other ladies riding horses and having fun below them with Xiang Bao'er and the other children, Xiang Shaolong was comforted: "Venturing out to war this time round, my biggest takeaways are not the accomplishments on the battlefield but it was learning two important lessons of life."

An enthusiastic Jing Jun probed him to go on.

Xiang Shaolong begun: "Firstly, I have learnt how to make peace with defeat. Just when you thought victory is in your grasp, the unexpected can always happen and reward you with defeat instead."

Still feeling apprehensive, Teng Yi agreed: "Li Mu is truly the God of War. With him around, our armies can forget about invading Zhao."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "On the battlefield, Li Mu is invincible and even Wang Jian may not be his match. Nonetheless, an open attack is easy to defend but a hidden weapon is hard to guard against. There will come a day when he will meet his demise at the hands of his own muddle-headed king and traitorous officials. Such is the never-changing end result for generals who have achieved the most merits for their kingdoms."

Teng Yi was incredulous: "Shaolong seems to be speaking with a great deal of emotion. Can you enlighten us further?"

Xiang Shaolong added: "That is exactly what I learnt from my Lin Zi trip and also the second lesson. In politics, there is no code of brotherhood. For the sake of one's survival and State, even the best friends and buddies can be betrayed."

An expression of deep contemplation was revealed on the faces of Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong advised: "As a result, we must make preparations for a rainy day. Otherwise, when disaster strikes, we would end up losing all our hard-won possessions due to our state of confusion. The circumstances are ever unpredictable and life is full of ups and downs. It is better to be safe than sorry."

At this juncture, a lone Ji Yanran was riding up the hill to join them and coincidentally overheard the last two sentences of

Xiang Shaolong. She praised: "Hubby's two sentences are truly thought-provoking and comprise deep connotations. Yanran can put my mind at ease after hearing it!"

His heart swelling with limitless tenderness, Xiang Shaolong looked over to Ji Yanran who is approaching his side. With his heroic aura increasing by leaps and bounds, he swore: "We must finish our last fight with a bang. Not only must we take out Lu Buwei, we must also extract ourselves from here in one piece and proceed to the borderlands, living in tranquility for the rest of our lives."

Teng Yi cautioned: "However, if Crown Prince has the intention to get rid of us, he can do so without any reservations. Countering him is not going to be easy."

Jing Jun was flabbergasted: "Is there really such a possibility?"

To Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran guided: "I think Hubby should honestly tell Little Jun why this is a possibility! Otherwise, Little Jun may not comprehend the actual danger and it may give rise to unforeseen danger."

His face losing colour, Jing Jun stammered: "In this case, the rumours must be true."

Xiang Shaolong slowly nodded his head and told him about Xiao Pan's heritage. He instructed at the end: "You must preserve this secret at all costs. Little Jun must not breathe a word of it to anyone else, including Dan'er."

Exhaling a breath of cold air, Jing Jun recounted: "Thinking of that day when Crown Prince angrily beheaded Qian Zhi, I am more than convinced that he will sacrifice anything in order to maintain his hold on the throne."

In a deep voice, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "For my entire life, people have been constantly deceiving me and I suspect Crown Prince is guilty of that as well. Have the three of you heard of the story: Cunning hares gone, dogs are cooked?"

Even Ji Yanran who is well versed with all kinds of literature does not know about the story. In a daze, she asked: "What is it about?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly scolded himself for divulging too much of his modern knowledge. He explained: "When all the wild hares have been hunted and devoured, the hunter would have nothing to hunt and would cook the hunting dogs to satisfy his hunger. Presently, we are embroiled in a similar situation. When the factions of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are annihilated, we would become the hunting dogs. To make it worse, we are the ones who knows about Crown Prince's secret background and will pose a threat to the stability of his rule."

Teng Yi nodded: "Hearing these thoughts of Third Brother, I, Second Brother, can put my mind at ease. Should we try to leave earlier? Without us, Lu Buwei will still meet a terrible ending."

Xiang Shaolong disagreed: "If we were to leave at once, I guarantee none of us will be able to meet Big Brother alive."

The three of them were instantly stunned.

Shifting his gaze to the faraway horizon, Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I personally raised him and no one knows about his willpower as much as I do. Back when he was just a teen, he hatched a plan to kill Zhao Mu with his own hands and afterwards, he would still brag about it. If I am not mistaken, within our Wu Family, there must be someone who cannot resist the temptation and has agreed to become his spy. As a result, none of our activities can escape his detection."

His eyes blazing with a chilling aura, Jing Jun cursed: "If I discover who is the traitor, I will kill him at once without any hesitation."

Ji Yanran suggested: "Deceit can run both ways. If we manage to find out who is the spy, we can use him to mislead our enemy."

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "The best time for us to run away is the heaven-sent day when Crown Prince is away in Yongdu fighting against the rebels. After that day, trying to escape will be much more challenging."

Teng Yi burst out laughing: "My sentiments exactly."

Xiang Shaolong deliberated: "Crown Prince's main concern is me as an individual. As long as I am here, he would not obstruct the others from leaving. Let's exploit this circumstance and send most of our people away to the borderlands, including Tingfang and Bao'er. Crown Prince

will find it hard to disagree because at least, on the surface, he has promised to let me leave.”

Ji Yanran frowned: “But when it is time for us to leave, it would not be so easy.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned Jing Jun: “How many warriors are we left with in the Wu Family?”

Jing Jun replied: “Adding the men from my village and subtracting those who perished on the battlefield, we have about two thousand and one hundred men. We will require substantial manpower to protect the women and children on the way to the borderlands. There won’t be much warriors left!”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “The more men we have, the harder it is to flee. Three hundred men will suffice. However, they must be the cream of the crop and their loyalty must be above question. Second Brother and Fifth Brother, please see to it! If our forces are limited, Crown Prince may lessen his guard against us.”

Ji Yanran muttered: “Hubby, did it cross your mind that when dealing with those rebels, Crown Prince would certainly activate the fierce army of Qin and completely surround the perimeter of Yongdu and Xianyang? With our limited numbers and faced with unanticipated changes, how can we hope to successfully exonerate ourselves?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly rationalized: “If Crown Prince wishes to kill me, he has to do so himself. Do you think he can simply instruct Fourth Brother, Lord Changping, Huan Qi or

the others to come after me? What would be his excuse? The only way is to push the blame to Lu Buwei or Lao Ai. For example, he can get Mao Jiao to indirectly get rid of me as he is supposedly working for Lao Ai. When left with no other choice, he would personally lead an army after me. After taking me down, he can easily falsify a criminal act on me.”

Teng Yi warned: “Third Brother’s analysis is very thorough. However, if Crown Prince is bent on killing us and we have a spy among ourselves, we will be at a serious disadvantage.”

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: “Can we arrange some secret preparations around the farm? In case of contingencies, we could retreat here and hide ourselves before finding another way to leave? Firstly, we can avoid the ambush of the Qin military and we can also trick Crown Prince into thinking that he can secretly kill us over here.”

Ji Yanran sighed: “Digging a tunnel is the best way to escape. The problem is, how do we keep it a secret?”

Suddenly, her petite frame lightly shuddered: “Yanran has found a way.”

The three men joyfully look at her.

Pointing to the southeast corner edge of the farm where there is a mausoleum which houses the tablets of Lady Ni and the others ladies. Ji Yanran proposed: “Using renovating the mausoleum as an excuse, we can secretly build a tunnel as long as we only engage the men from Little Jun’s village as well as the followers of Yanran. Except for the deities and spirits, no one would be wiser.”

Xiang Shaolong was troubled: "The problem is, Crown Prince is aware of our brilliant strategizing skills. If he were to position scouts at the nearby hilltops before attacking us, they could easily spot and catch up to us. Moreover, there is only four months until the coronation and there is insufficient time to build a tunnel that is really long and useful."

Jing Jun offered another plan: "This is easily resolved. In the past when I was still a kid, we would hide in a cave whenever we lose in a fight against the kids from the neighbouring village. In the same context, after we come out from the tunnel, we can hole up in a secret hiding place for a few days. Once the invading army has retreated, we can quietly slip away. You can count on me to take care of this."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Please act on it at once."

That afternoon, under the leadership of Wu Yingyuan, a top level Wu Clan meeting was conducted. After finalizing all the details of their retreat, Xiang Shaolong emptied his mind and indulged himself in a lifestyle of happiness with his family.

His unfortunate encounters over the past two years felt like a dream.

Nevertheless, he is still in dreamland because whenever he thought of himself in the 21st century, he felt as if he is trapped in this amazing dream.

Three days later, Qin Qing came to visit.

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and hugged her firmly in his arms to compensate her for her longing and pining.

Qin Qing was shy by nature and with Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters peeping at the side, it exacerbated the situation. Unable to struggle out of his bear hug, she was so embarrassed even the roots of her ears turned red.

Ji Yanran and the others understandingly left the inner hall and allow the two of them to have a chance to speak in private.

Releasing the enchanting beauty from his hold, Xiang Shaolong pulled her to a corner and sat down with her. Stroking her in an affectionate manner, he observed: "Sister Qin has grown thin!"

Qin Qing lowered her head: "I came specially to look for you because I have something important to tell you."

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze: "What is so important?"

Batting her eyes once at him, Qin Qing put on a serious demeanor and articulated: "Recently, Crown Prince got his trusted follower to select a courtesan and began tutoring her in court etiquette. The entire process was extremely secretive. It was only pure coincidence that led me to discover it when I came across the royal tailors sewing new clothes for her."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "What is so special about that?"

Her face revealing an expression of fear, Qin Qing broke down in a quivering voice: "In terms of appearance and figure, this courtesan closely resembles Empress. Ah! Shaolong, I am so frightened!"

Xiang Shaolong opened his arms to envelope Qin Qing who is leaping into his bosom. His only reaction is a chilling sensation throughout his nervous system.

He instantly knew what is on Qin Qing's mind.

Xiao Pan has decided to kill Zhu Ji but no matter what, Zhu Ji is still his birth mother in the eyes of the public. Killing her is neither a filial nor righteous act. Thus, he had to make a switch and replace the real with a decoy. In the future, he can simply confine her substitute within the palace and easily conceal this horrifying truth from the citizens of Qin.

Qin Qing is shocked out of her wits because she did not know that Zhu Ji is not the real mother of Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan is no longer the Xiao Pan of the past. He has evolved into a brutal and merciless Yingzheng who will not hesitate to exterminate anything that stands between him and his goal.

Back then, he did promise he would not harm Zhu Ji. He is obviously reneging on his word.

What can he, Xiang Shaolong, do?

He still harbours immense feelings of guilt and emotions towards Zhu Ji.

Given the present scenario, what can he do?

Qin Qing lamented in a melancholic voice: "Crown Prince has changed a lot."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "How does he treat you?"

Qin Qing answered: "He still treats me well and often chats me up. Nonetheless, I can sense a shift in his attitude towards you. In the past, he loves to talk about you in our conversations but ever since you came back from Lin Zi, he no longer brings you up in our discussions. Aye! Whenever he maintains his silence, I really cannot fathom what is going on in his mind."

His heart turning colder than before, Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Does he know that you are coming to the farms to look for me?"

Qin Qing groaned: "It is impossible to conceal anything from him. He even instructed me to bring some cakes to you."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I would rather die than eat his food."

Qin Qing forcefully sat up with her back straightened. Her face losing colour, she probed: "Will he dare to harm you?"

Holding onto her fragrant shoulder, Xiang Shaolong gently consoled: "Don't panic. The cakes are not poisonous. Tell me, if I am leaving for the borderlands, will you come along with me?"

Diving into his bosom again, Qin Qing wrapped her arms around his waist, declaring: “Even if you, Xiang Shaolong, has decided to go to the edge of the earth, Qin Qing will still want to be by your side. I will never have any regrets.”

Tightly hugging her curvaceous and aromatic body, Xiang Shaolong’s soul flew past countless rivers and mountains, finally stopping at the faraway fascinating and delightful vast grasslands.

Only there can he finally enjoy days of happiness that he has been waiting for for the past ten years.

CHAPTER 3

Xianyang Happenings

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER residing for three days, Qin Qing returned to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong is now fully conscious of Xiao Pan's mindset: To protect his throne, he has no qualms about killing all that stands in his way.

Although it is uncertain if Xiao Pan will eventually come after himself, Xiang Shaolong decided to assume the worst after his Lin Zi experience.

He kept the habit of waking up every morning before dawn to practice his sabre play and even added archery to his training regime.

From the warriors of the Wu Family and Jing Village, he selected three hundred men which naturally include top experts like Wu Yan Zhe and Jing Shan. After specially arming them with chromium sabres and strong bows that were forged by Uncle Qing, Xiang Shaolong even went to the extent of imparting his flying needles skill to them. Day and night, they practiced nonstop.

In the meantime, Wu Yingyuan and the others started to leave the farm in batches. When it was time for Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Zhou Wei, Shan Lan, the Tian Sisters, Lu Dan'er and Xiang Bao'er to leave, everyone was filled with reluctance and the separation was an emotional one.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran accompanied the convoy for three days before returning back to the farm, which is now an uninviting and foreboding empty shell. They felt uneasy at this change of environment.

At dinnertime, Teng Yi remarked in a deep voice: "Wu Yingen should be the spy."

The others were stunned.

Wu Yingen is the third younger brother of Wu Yingyuan. Although he is against abandoning the life of luxury in Xianyang, no one would have expected that he would become the spy for Xiao Pan.

Ji Yanran wondered: "All along, I have paid extra attention to this man. However, why is Second Brother so confident that he is the spy?"

Teng Yi explained: "I was able to come to this conclusion because he insisted on staying behind to manage the farm and only leave with the last batch of personnel. This behavior contradicts his usual greedy and cowardly nature. Therefore, I placed him and his followers under surveillance and found out that he would secretly dispatch messengers to Xianyang. I informed Master Tao about it and instructed him to send stalkers after the messengers. True enough, the messengers would enter the palace by a hidden entrance to make their reports."

Jing Jun aggressively cursed: "I've never liked him."

Xiang Shaolong was comforted: "Fortunately, we took early precautions. But with him around, it is quite troublesome for us to carry out our plans. Is there any technique that we can use to chase him and his men away?"

Ji Yanran contemplated: "He has merely been deceived into becoming a pawn for somebody else. Due to his craving for wealth and a materialistic lifestyle, he committed these acts of stupidity! If we can exploit his weaknesses and employ scare tactics, such as hinting him that by spying for Crown Prince, it is as good as making it easier for Crown Prince to attack us, I guarantee that he will wake up and realize what a fool he was."

Teng Yi frowned: "You must exercise caution and don't exacerbate the situation. If he were to report this to Crown Prince, Crown Prince would know that we are guarding against him."

Her lovely eyes flashing with brilliance, Ji Yanran shrilly snorted: "If we send his wives, concubines and children away, what can he do besides obeying us? Leave this to Yanran."

Noting that Ji Yanran is personally handling the affair, Xiang Shaolong can put his mind at ease. He checked: "We have to return to Xianyang tomorrow. Who is staying behind to oversee the farms?"

Ji Yanran bitterly laughed: "Let Ji Yanran stay back! Otherwise, Wu Guo may not be able to stand up to Third Master."

Xiang Shaolong is most unwilling but also recognizes that this is the best arrangement. Time is running out and Xiao Pan will be coronated in three month's time. All their preparations will come to fruition on that day.

Back at Xianyang, Xiang Shaolong's first move is to enter the palace and seek an audience with Xiao Pan.

As per normal, Xiao Pan received him in the Imperial Study and Li Si is present too.

After accepting Xiang Shaolong's paying of respect, Xiao Pan commanded: "Subordinate Li, give me your report on the happenings of Xianyang."

Li Si seems to be afraid of coming into contact with Xiang Shaolong's gaze. Lowering his head and flipping the documents in front of him, he narrated in a deep voice: "Lu Buwei is spending most of his time outside Xianyang. Using the excuse that he is supervising the last leg of Zhengguo Canal's construction, he was actually meeting up with the local officials all over Qin, trying to garner support from them in preparation for turmoil within the Court of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong intentionally tested him: "What about Guan Zhongxie?"

Still not looking in his direction, Li Si kept his head low and responded: "Guan Zhongxie was freshly dispatched by Crown Prince to the region of Han in order to pressurize them. Unless he disobeyed his orders, he should be far away from here during Crown Prince's coronation."

Xiao Pan plainly added: "This man's archery skills is too amazing. With him around, Guaren cannot eat or sleep in peace. Guaren has planted spies around him and should he do anything out of the ordinary, someone will kill him immediately with Guaren's secret decree."

Li Si quickly peeped at Xiang Shaolong once before lowering his head again, broadcasting: "The entire Yongdu has more or less landed in the hands of Lao Ai. With his thirty thousand followers, they have occupied every single official post in Yongdu."

Xiao Pan sniggered: "Guaren is purposely allowing him to grow without any restrictions, indirectly numbing him to the

real sense of danger. Afterwards, I will exterminate him and his cronies once and for all. Humph! I'll just tolerate his willful lifestyle for a few more months!"

Looking directly at Xiang Shaolong for the first time, Li Si enlightened: "According to Crown Prince's estimate, Lu Buwei will take advantage of Crown Prince's trip to Yongdu and stage a rebellion simultaneously with Lao Ai, thereby gaining control of Xianyang. As the Imperial Infantry is still commanded by Xu Shang and Lord Changwen's Imperial Guards would have to escort Crown Prince to Yongdu, it is possible for Lu Buwei to succeed in his endeavor."

Xiao Pan added: "Both traitors Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are carrying the Seal of the Empress. Among the confusion, it is likely that some righteous officials would be misled by them and unknowingly end up as their accomplices."

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Leave Xianyang to me. I guarantee that Lu Buwei will end up in failure."

Xiao Pan and Li Si exchanged looks of surprise.

After a long time, Xiao Pan insisted in a deep voice: "Without Great General at the side of Guaren, how can Guaren be at ease? We can place Xianyang under the care of the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Great General must accompany Guaren to Yongdu."

Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this reaction from him. Sighing to himself, he pretended to be unaffected and accepted: "Subordinate dare not disobey Crown Prince's order."

Frowning at Xiang Shaolong for some time, Xiao Pan then turned to Li Si and instructed: "Guaren wishes to speak privately with Great General."

Not daring to look at Xiang Shaolong anymore, Li Si retreated from the room.

The study is now filled with an awkward silence.

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath of air: "Is Great General dissatisfied with Guaren? There are many occasions when Guaren is left without a choice and was forced by circumstances to undertake such extreme measures."

Staring unblinkingly at Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he is looking at a complete stranger. He lightly checked: "How does Crown Prince plan to deal with Empress?"

Without backing down at all, Xiao Pan matched his stare. Hearing his question, his eyes started to glow with a chilling aura as he icily hissed: "Till today, Great General is still speaking up for this wanton and corrupted lady who has destroyed the reputation of the Qin royalty?"

His own eyes glowing with a chilling aura too, Xiang Shaolong continued staring and frostily reminded: "This is subordinate's sole request for Crown Prince. I don't care who else you are going to kill but I hope you will take into account Empress's past relationship with you and let her off."

A flash of killing intent sparkled once in the royal eyes of Xiao Pan but it is unclear if it was directed at Zhu Ji or him,

Xiang Shaolong. Recovering his tranquility, Xiao Pan decided in a deep voice: "If she stays in the palace and no longer intervene in State affairs, Guaren will not treat her shabbily. Is Great General satisfied?"

If not for Qin Qing leaking out the information of a Zhu Ji replacement, Xiang Shaolong may have believed his words. But right now, all he feels is a sense of disappointment.

If Xiang Shaolong is single and without any dependents, he would straightaway expose his lie in a full counteroffensive.

But remembering the lives of Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Ji Yanran, Wu Family and Jing Village all resting on himself, he had to swallow this ball of anger.

Serving a king is like walking with tigers. If one is not careful, it could result in personal death and clan annihilation.

This future Qin Shihuang is not easy to get along with.

His tone softening, Xiao Pan gently inquired: "Master do not trust me?"

Brimming with emotions, Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air before asserting in a deep voice: "Crown Prince is well prepared against the forces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. Why do you need me around? I might as well leave tonight!"

Xiao Pan thundered: "No!"

Xiang Shaolong's heart was shaken as well.

He was using these words to test Xiao Pan's response. At this moment, he has finally drawn a conclusion, and it is the most bone-chilling conclusion of all.

Xiao Pan inhaled a deep breath: "Master had promised to leave only after watching me become King. How can Master go back on your word."

He sighed with the same breath: "Don't you wish to kill Traitor Lu with your own hands?"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that if he keeps persisting along this path, he can forget about leaving the palace alive. Pretending to be mentally and physically drained, he bitterly smiled: "If I keep my word, will Crown Prince keep yours too?"

Xiao Pan was annoyed: "Since when did Guaren fail to keep my word?"

Xiang Shaolong thought: The changes within these two years are really drastic. Xiao Pan and himself can no longer communicate with complete honesty and trust. Now, both of them have to resort to mutual scheming and lying.

Of course Xiang Shaolong is not so stupid as to expose Xiao Pan's plan to create a fake Zhu Ji. He smiled: "If Crown Prince has nothing more to say, Subordinate wishes to return home for a rest."

Stepping out of the study, Li Si is still standing there. He saw Xiang Shaolong departing and whispered: "Let me send Great General off."

Xiang Shaolong guessed he has something to tell him and walked by his side. Surprisingly, Li Si did not say a single word during the long walk to the square.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong, Jing Shan and the others brought his horse over.

Li Si suddenly whispered: "Shaolong! Get out of here!"

He then left with a helpless expression on his face.

Inside his heart, Xiang Shaolong can feel a tsunami of emotions rising and they are unlikely to subside anytime soon.

Li Si is now the closest and most trusted official of Xiao Pan. Based on his intelligence, he should have a good grasp of Xiao Pan's intentions. As a matter of fact, from the clues that have popped up, it is not impossible for him to deduce Xiao Pan's real background and the genuine relationship between Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong. From these assumptions, he could foresee that Xiao Pan will eventually seek the extermination of him, Xiang Shaolong.

Without Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can preserve his Yingzheng identity forever.

Besides Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, anyone else would not be as convincing or exert the same amount of influence.

Just as Xiang Shaolong rode out of the palace, someone called his name from behind.

Turning back, he saw Lord Changwen chasing up to him from the palace gate. Lord Changwen suggested: "Let's talk as we ride!"

Xiang Shaolong was incredulous: "What is it regarding? Don't you have to work?"

With a heavy expression, Lord Changwen interrogated: "Is Shaolong really leaving for the borderlands?"

Xiang Shaolong simply responded: "I am ill suited to be here, because I cannot stand acts of war and violence. You have known me for some time and you should have a clear idea of what kind of person I am."

Lord Changwen was quiet for a short spell, as if he wanted to say something but could not bring himself to say it. He finally disclosed: "Crown Prince doesn't seem too happy with your decision, saying that it will affect the morale of the military."

His heart aching once, Xiang Shaolong affirmed in a low voice: "You need not persuade me any more. My only regret is not leaving two years ago. If I did, my recollections of Great Qin shall be the fondest as I race my horse across the vast grasslands."

Completing his sentence, he squeezed the horse's belly to increase his pace and sped away from a stunned Long Changwen who had reined his horse to a stop, leaving him far behind in a blink of an eye.

Ten over riders galloped like the wind, overtaking every horse or carriage that they encountered, racing down

Xianyang's highway at full speed with the sunset as a backdrop.

In this instance, Xiang Shaolong has given up all hope on Xiao Pan.

He has one major concern in his mind right now: How can he save Zhu Ji from the murderous clutches of Xiao Pan.

Ever since he came to this ancient warring period, he has to face all sorts of challenges on a daily basis, inadvertently training his willpower to be stronger than anybody else. Even when his opponent is Qin Shihuang, he does not possess the slightest nuance of fear.

But he would never underestimate Xiao Pan because he is the only person in this time period to have full knowledge of Xiao Pan's fearsome character. In the annals of history, Qin Shihuang utilizes heavy-handed methods to exercise his authority throughout his empire. At the end of the day, the whole of China will bow down at his feet.

Ironically, this heavyweight historical character was personally fashioned by Xiang Shaolong himself.

Xiang Shaolong wished he could face the sky and shout with all his might in order to vent frustration in his heart.

But he would not do that.

Only by trudging on can he stay alive and travel to the borderlands to enjoy a new lease of blissful life.

If Zhu Ji is willing to follow him, Xiang Shaolong would definitely bring her along, using this opportunity to compensate her for his lies and years of guilt.

With just one leg stepping inside Wu Residence, Tao Fang had already begun pulling him towards the inner hall. Curious, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "What is it?"

In a secretive hush-hush manner, Tao Fang snickered: "Your old buddies are here!"

At this juncture, he was entering the inner hall and saw Teng Yi engaging two guests in a conversation. They turned out to be Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan.

A thrilled Xiang Shaolong ran towards them. Holding the hands of both men, he was so overwhelmed with happiness he was momentarily speechless.

His eyes turning red due to a burst of strong emotions, Tu Xian clarified: "I did not know that Yuetan is coming over to Xianyang so I did not inform you guys in advance."

With the groove of his eyes wet as well, Xiao Yuetan grinned: "Elder Brother used Shaolong's life as a gambling chip in Lin Zi; I trust Shaolong will not blame Elder Brother, right?"

Teng Yi laughed: "Since we won the gamble, of course!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Elder Brother's confidence in me is even greater than the confidence I have in myself. Fortunately, I managed to run away fast enough from Cao Qiudao. Otherwise, I would not be able to hold hands and

chit-chat with both of you today. This is called: Among the thirty-six stratagems, running away is a top stratagem.”

Everyone broke out into laughter.

Tu Xian sighed: “Well said. Running away is a top stratagem. Earlier, we were analyzing a plan to try and leave this forsaken place.”

Tao Fang chuckled: “Let’s sit down and discuss further!”

Once everyone is properly seated, Xiao Yuetan narrated: “My purpose in coming back to Xianyang is to witness Traitor Lu’s downfall with my own eyes. But after speaking with Brother Teng, I realized that Shaolong is in an unfavourable situation too.”

Laying his eyes on Xiao Yuetan, all the grievances in Xiang Shaolong’s heart has disappeared without a trace and was replaced by a heroic aura. He cheerfully laughed: “A true hero is someone who can continue to stand tall in the face of trouble. With Brother Xiao assisting me, all my worries are gone with the wind.”

Tu Xian was pleased: “Looking at Shaolong’s overwhelming confidence, we are happy for you too. Regardless of the danger, we shall maintain our high morale. Now that Traitor Lu’s destruction is certain, our only problem is how to safely reach the borderlands and enjoy the rest of our days in peace!”

Tao Fang added: “Earlier on, Manager Tu has made a detailed analysis of Traitor Lu’s situation. The forces at his

disposal include the Imperial Infantry, Guan Zhongxie's team, fifteen thousand family warriors and his partner-in-crime Lao Ai's camp. Although there are several officials who are in cahoots with him, they are of no use when real trouble strikes. If we plan our strategies and deployments well, we could force him to a corner and exact revenge on him."

Xiao Yuetan solemnly state: "The crux of the problem is: How can we take down Lu Buwei while guaranteeing a safe retreat."

Xiang Shaolong beamed: "Initially, I was troubled over this but now that Elder Brother is here, it is a different story altogether!"

Xiao Yuetan bitterly smiled: "Don't become over-reliant on me. For all you know, I may fall below your expectations."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "Does Elder Brother have the confidence to create another Xiang Shaolong?"

Everyone was stunned on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong gleefully explained: "Wu Guo is very talented when it comes to masquerading. In addition, his body build is quite similar to mine. If Elder Brother has a way to change his face to look like mine, I am sure we can deceive everyone and launch a stealth attack on our enemies."

As everyone gazed at him with anticipation, Xiao Yuetan contemplated for a short while before concluding: "This would be the greatest challenge for me, Xiao Yuetan."

Despite the significant difficulties, I can guarantee that I will not disappoint Shaolong.”

Slamming his palm on the table, Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “With these words from Elder Brother, the circumstances have improved dramatically. The first person we must kill is Guan Zhongxie. With him dead, Lu Buwei is as good as a toothless tiger and his evil influence will be contained.”

Teng Yi nodded his head in agreement: “That’s right! If this man picks up his bow and arrows, we can expect heavy casualties.”

Tao Fang reminded: “However, our main concern is not Lu Buwei but Yingzheng.”

Xiang Shaolong simply clarified: “That is precisely why I needed another Xiang Shaolong.”

The corner of Xiao Yuetan’s mouth revealed a trace of a smile. Exchanging looks with Tu Xian first, he then laughing sighed: “Shaolong is truly formidable; you have deceived us thoroughly.”

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong realized that Xiao Yuetan and Tu Xian had already inferred that Xiao Pan is not the real Yingzheng.

And it is also because of this reason that Xiao Pan is going all out to kill himself.

For those in the know, they would have guessed that Xiao Pan is acting this way because of a particular reason.

Only when Xiang Shaolong is dead can Xiao Pan solve the root of the problem and not live in constant fear of another identity crisis.

The showdown between him and Xiao Pan has long been decided by fate. Nobody can prevent this from happening.

CHAPTER 4

Hard To Differentiate Between Real And Fake

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

OVER the next ten days, Xiang Shaolong attended Court as per normal but politely declined all entertainment engagements. Instead, he devoted all his time and energy in training his team of three hundred elite 'Special Forces' members.

Their equipment can be considered the best this era can offer, incorporating his modern 21st century design and was further improvised by Uncle Qing, the head of Yue's blacksmith association, allowing them to become the living

examples of the martial arts experts illustrated in Wuxia novels. Besides being proficient in all types of normal and hidden weapons, they are able to climb any wall and trespass any property, becoming what we would know as stealth ninjas.

On this evening, Ji Yanran and Wu Shu came over from the farms and they brought good news.

The gorgeous Talented Lady exclaimed: "Under my mixture of soft and hard tactics, Wu Yingen finally confessed that he has been supplying information to Crown Prince. However, he insisted that he was doing this for the sake of the Wu Clan as Crown Prince has instructed him to try and persuade us from leaving for the borderlands!"

Teng Yi icily smiled: "A traitor will always have his excuses!"

Ji Yanran explained: "Yanran did believe his words, because when Yanran pointed out that due to Hubby's incredible accomplishments, influence and prowess, it is possible for Crown Prince to view Hubby as a threat and a target for extermination, he was so terrified his face turned green and his lips turned white. In the end, he disclosed the identity of the person liaising with him."

Xiang Shaolong interrogated in a deep voice: "Who is it?"

Ji Yanran replied: "His correspondent is a man named Yao Jia. Does Hubby know him?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "He is the assistant of Li Si and he is responsible for communicating with the various States. He

just came back from Qi and I would classify him as a very wise man.”

Ji Yanran added: “Third Master En has now recognized the severity of the situation and promised to cooperate fully with us. To be safe, Yanran has sent all his family warriors and followers to the borderlands, just in case Yao Jia has bribed them individually.”

Xiang Shaolong determined: “Wu Yingen’s greatest usefulness is that through him, we can dupe Crown Prince into thinking that we will only leave for the borderlands after everything has been completed.”

In a deep voice, Teng Yi reminded: “If I am this ungrateful brat, I will have you killed at Yongdu by the hands of Lao Ai. When that happens, I can use the excuse of avenging you and fully annihilate the forces of Lao Ai, killing two birds with one stone.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “No matter what, we must mislead him into believing that we will only leave after killing Lu Buwei.”

Turning to Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong proposed: “Yanran’s thinking is much more thorough than we, the two brothers. Can you try to fake some story and reveal it bit by bit to Yao Jia before the coronation? It would be good to make the story obscure, letting him slowly deduce and piece the jigsaw puzzle before guessing the final message that we want to pass to Crown Prince.”

Ji Yanran batted her eyes once at him, answering: "No need to flatter Yanran, I'll just do my best!"

Teng Yi probed: "We would need to leave for Yongdu in two months time. Has Third Brother thought of a plan to kill Lu Buwei and simultaneously make a safe retreat?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "I want to see Zhu Ji before confirming the details."

The two persons, Ji Yanran and Teng Yi were utterly shocked.

Teng Yi advised: "Lao Ai is now regarding you as a thorn in the flesh. If you go to Yongdu, you may get into trouble. Moreover, if Crown Prince knows about it, he would be more determined to kill you than ever."

Ji Yanran also spoke up: "Empress is no longer the Empress of the past. She may even assume that you killed her real son in order to make the switch. It is really not appropriate for you to see her."

Xiang Shaolong did not consider these points. His heart becoming uncomfortable, he turned speechless.

Patting his shoulder, Teng Yi consoled: "As long as we act with a clear conscience, it does not matter how others judge us!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I wanted to see Zhu Ji and try to prevent her from getting killed is precisely because it is weighing on my conscience."

To Ji Yanran, he implored: "Can you invite Sister Qing over? Through her, I can meet Zhu Ji in secret."

Her exquisite face darkening, Ji Yanran furiously reprimanded: "Once you have decided on something, you would stubbornly follow it through. Zhu Ji has mothered two bastards for Lao Ai, do you really believe she will abandon her two sons and leave with you? Presently, we can barely fend for ourselves and here you are, trying to increase our burden. When Tingfang and Zhizhi are leaving, they did instruct me to watch over you and not let you participate in any dangerous activities. If you insist on meeting that lady, Ji Yanran seeks a divorce!"

Ever since Xiang Shaolong got to know Ji Yanran, this is the first time she is so fierce and upset. Petrified, he shuddered and dare not defend himself anymore.

Teng Yi nodded: "Today, Second Brother is not going to help you, especially when this concerns the life and death of the entire clan. No matter what, Third Brother has to listen to Yanran."

A helpless Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to agree.

Only then did Ji Yanran's anger subside.

Over the next few weeks, besides giving his full attention to training the three hundred men team, Xiang Shaolong also instructed Wu Guo on the finer tips of impersonating himself, for he must succeed in deceiving Xiao Pan, Li Si and the others who know Xiang Shaolong very well.

The only loophole is his voice. Luckily, Ji Yanran has an excellent idea: At a suitable time, Xiang Shaolong will start faking an illness. Therefore, even when his voice becomes deeper and hoarse, it will not arouse any suspicions. On top of that, he can do away with speaking less, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

That night, Xiao Yuetan came back from the farms and borrowed a set of Xiang Shaolong's official robes. Locking Wu Guo and himself inside a room, he has everyone patiently waiting outside, eager to find out how Wu Guo will eventually turn out.

Until now, everyone is still puzzled over Xiang Shaolong's decision to have Wu Guo masquerade as himself. Unable to tolerate the suspense, Jing Jun posed the question to him.

Xiang Shaolong responded: "Firstly, I want to deceive Lu Buwei. Crown Prince has decided to leave Xianyang under the care of Lu Buwei. Based on Lu Buwei's character, he would use this opportunity to get rid of Second Brother and Fifth Brother, leaving me... YI!"

Ji Yanran, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were stupefied, staring at Xiang Shaolong whose face is suddenly drained of colour.

With a skeptical expression, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "Do you think Guan Zhongxie would employ the same technique and slip back to Xianyang? We are one month away from the coronation day and the current time frame is a critical period. Would he be contended to remain stationed far away?"

Teng Yi rationalized: "Without Brother Xiao's talented hands, how can they create a fake Guan Zhongxie?"

Ji Yanran debated: "If Lu Buwei has the intention, it is not difficult to find someone who resembles Guan Zhongxie. By getting people to provide additional cover, like mistaking fish eye for pearls, it is highly possible for Hubby's hypothesis to be right."

To Tao Fang who had just arrived, Xiang Shaolong told him about his conjecture and added: "Please inform Manager Tu and ask him to pay special attention to this matter. If we can track Guan Zhongxie's movements, he'll be the first to go down, followed by Han Jie and the rest."

Jing Jun quizzed: "Earlier, does Third Brother mean that he wishes to hoodwink Lu Buwei into thinking that Third Brother has accompanied Crown Prince to Yongdu but is actually staying behind in Xianyang to counter him?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "That is the main reason. In addition, I can carry out my plans without Crown Prince looking over my shoulder."

Teng Yi reviewed: "Nevertheless, we must be extra meticulous in our deployment and find a way to get Wu Guo out of Yongdu. Otherwise, this kid may end up in a life-threatening situation."

The voice of Xiao Yuetan resonated: "That's the brilliant part of the plan. By simply reverting back to his original appearance, it will be quite easy for Wu Guo to make his getaway."

As everyone looked over to the open doors of the room with anticipation, Xiao Yuetan and another 'Xiang Shaolong' slowly strode out, earning cheers and exclamations.

With the appearance of Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo faced the crowd and sang an opera tune before striking a pose. Pretending to grab the hilt of an imaginary Hundred Battle Sabre, he roared: "Traitor Lu, on your knees! I, Xiang Shaolong, have been waiting for seven long years to finally cut off your smelly head!" Amazingly, even his tone and voice is quite similar to Xiang Shaolong's.

The crowd instantly broke out into wild laughter and Tao Fang was laughing so hard he bent over and held onto his tummy.

Ji Yanran shrilly giggled: "This is impossible. How can the resemblance be so striking?"

Wu Guo stared at Ji Yanran with a surprised expression. He mocked: "Wifey, you are so muddle-headed you cannot even recognise your hubby? Don't blame me if I dump you."

His teasing naturally got the entire hall laughing all over again.

Panting from her laughter, Ji Yanran threatened: "If you dare to dump me, I'll kill you with a single sword slash."

Watching the scene unfolding, Xiang Shaolong can feel his emotions stirring. For the past two years, the Wu Residence has not seen such a carefree and happy ambience that was filled with joy and laughter.

Putting on a frightened look, Wu Guo relented: "Wifey is so fierce. Hubby shall give in and apologise."

Unwilling to continue the banter with him, Ji Yanran faced Xiao Yuetan and questioned: "Mister Xiao is truly the world's number one make up artist. How did you create this miracle?"

As he lovingly admired his own handiwork, Xiao Yuetan lightly articulated: "It took me five days to sculpt Shaolong's bust from wood. Afterwards, I concocted a skin mask using a special recipe to recreate the fake face. Finally, I touched up the colouring to the smallest details. Thereafter, another Xiang Shaolong is born."

Jing Jun praised: "In the future, I would not dare to believe the outer appearance of anyone."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "Without Wu Guo, even if I have three heads and six arms, my talents would be inapplicable. This fellow's body figure is almost the same as Shaolong, except that his shoulder is not as broad. Thus, I have added padding to his clothes to conceal this loophole."

Facing the sky and laughing out loud, Wu Guo took huge strides up and down the hall, mimicking Xiang Shaolong's body language. It is really difficult to tell them apart.

The two men Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan are sitting within the hall. Admiring the beautiful, star-studded sky, they were overwhelmed with emotions.

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Life is really baffling. Last time round, we were in Lin Zi, busy handling all sorts of people and dangerous situations. This time round, although we are back in Xianyang, we are again faced with the same scenario of trying to flee for our lives. But of course this round can be considered the last and final round. How wonderful!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "With Elder Brother giving pointers by the side, I am extremely confident that we will be able to reach the borderlands safely and enjoy the life that we have been pining for so long."

After a deep contemplation, Xiao Yuetan questioned in a serious tone: "We already knew that Yingzheng will not let Lu Buwei have a good ending and by staying back, we have to put up with a certain amount of risk. Should we make plans to leave before the coronation instead? Wouldn't that save us plenty of trouble?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "I did consider this too but discarded the notion because of two reasons. Firstly, the retreat of the entire clan would take some time to be completed. Secondly, I am concerned that Yingzheng has made secret preparations. If I displayed any signs of leaving, he would cut me off along the way and simply kill me while telling the world that I have left for the borderlands. As a result, we have to wait for the best window period, which is the day when Yingzheng is away in Yongdu for his coronation. And to further safeguard ourselves, we must attack Lu Buwei proactively; otherwise, we will die without a burial place."

Xiao Yuetan nodded in agreement: "Shaolong's thinking has covered all the angles."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "My thinking powers are inferior to Elder Brother's. I can outshine you presently because nobody understands Yingzheng's capabilities and callousness better than me. If we are not careful, we will all perish like a sinking ship on the open sea."

Xiao Yuetan wondered: "How do you plan to deal with Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong officially state: "I was about to seek guidance from Mister."

Supporting his bearded chin with one hand, Xiao Yuetan grinned: "Master Tu should be the correct person to consult. Besides him, no one has a clearer picture of Lu Buwei's actual strength and schemes. He has been patiently serving him for so many years in anticipation for this day to arrive."

Xiang Shaolong was elated: "In this case, I shall depend on the two of you to come up with the appropriate plans and strategies. The rest of us shall await your orders like soldiers."

Raising his head to gawk at the enchanting night sky, Xiang Shaolong fantasied: With Tu Xian's years of experience and Xiao Yuetan's wisdom, he would soon be able to view the same night sky from the borderlands.

The next morning, even before the sun has appeared, the warriors of Wu Residence are already up and assembled in

the garden, practicing their martial arts. Xiang Shaolong himself is patiently guiding Wu Guo in using a replica Hundred Battle Sabre that Uncle Qing has specially forged.

Although the chromium used in this sabre is not as good as the original, the sabre is already one of the best weapons that Uncle Qing has forged.

Being a martial arts exponent himself, regardless of bearing or aura, Wu Guo is able to fashion himself after Xiang Shaolong.

Using the Mozi Sword, Teng Yi engaged him in a duel. After more than a hundred moves later, Wu Guo exhibited signs of losing.

Wu Yan Zhe, Wu Shu, Jing Shan and the Guardians clapped and cheered for him.

Beckoning Wu Yan Zhe to his side, Xiang Shaolong advised: "Among the Guardians, you are the wisest and most steadfast. During the trip to Yongdu with Wu Guo, you must remember that safeguarding your lives is the top priority. Whenever the circumstances become unfavourable, use the grappling hooks and escape back here."

Wu Yan Zhe acknowledged: "Master Xiang, you can put your mind at ease. Two years ago, Master Tao has already stationed some men at Yongdu. Not only can we gain a good understanding of the situation, certain preparations have been put in place. In cases of emergency, they can offer shelter to us."

Standing beside them, Ji Yanran comforted: "This fellow Wu Guo is full of devious ideas. During any confrontations, he is always the one who walks away with the better deal. Ambushing him is easier said than done. Shaolong, you can put your mind at ease."

Xiang Shaolong has full conviction in Wu Guo's abilities; otherwise he would not have allowed him to take this risk. He specifically reminded Wu Yan Zhe who is now opposite him: "Crown Prince would wait for the best opportunity before launching a secret assault on me. That would be the time when he and Lao Ai are clashing head on. Otherwise, he would not be able to frame Lao Ai for my death."

Ji Yanran interrupted: "If there is a way to secure the mask on a corpse with the same body build as Hubby, we may be able to temporarily deceive Crown Prince."

His eyes lighting up, Wu Yan Zhe was thrilled: "Let's see what happens! I am certain it can be arranged."

At this juncture, a breathless Wu Guo came up to the three of them. With a proud air, he smirked: "How is my Hundred Battle Sabre Play?"

Ji Yanran giggled: "Look at you. Does your Master Xiang pant and gasp for air after a fight?"

Wu Guo cheekily laughed: "Don't forget that I have not fully recovered from my sickness. Some wheezing is considered normal."

Ji Yanran nodded: "You are good. I nearly forgot about that point."

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, she recommended: "Hubby had better look for Mister Xiao and get him to put some make up for you, giving you a sickly appearance. When Crown Prince sees your face, it would be easier for you to fake your illness later on."

Wu Guo added: "At the beginning, you should act tired. As time passes, you can gradually increase the signs of illness. That would be a perfect cover."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: This is called two heads are better than one. When he was about to speak out, he saw Tao Fang leading a man and walking briskly towards them. As the crowd looks towards him in astonishment, everyone erupted with delight.

The man turned out to be the long-absent Wang Jian, Qin's indomitable and legendary general.

CHAPTER 5

Reunion After A Long Split

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

COMPARED to the past, Wang Jian is more tanned and muscular-looking. As a matter of fact, he has transformed into someone with a powerful and masterful aura. The most striking were his sharp and electrifying eyes, radiating an impressive sensation despite his calm demeanour, truly befitting the characteristic of this celebrated general.

With a sincere smile hanging on his face, Wang Jian gave Xiang Shaolong a bear hug before releasing a long sigh:

“Does Third Brother know how much Little Brother has yearned for all of you?”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun leapt into their arms. As the four sworn brothers shared a group hug, it was such a touching and tear-jerking scene.

Wang Jian happily laughed and hugged Teng Yi and Jing Jun individually as a form of love. He observed: “Shaolong has lost some weight but you are much more awe-inspiring compared to the time when I left Xianyang.”

Turning to Ji Yanran, he smiled: “Third Sister in Law is much prettier too.”

The rest of the men started to swarm over, taking turns to shake hands and salute this renowned general.

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “When did Fourth Brother come back? Have you seen Crown Prince?”

Wang Jian mused: “Judging by my ordinary attire, you should have guessed that I came back secretly. Somehow, I felt that it is better for me to visit you guys first before paying my respects to Crown Prince.”

As everyone was stunned at his words, Ji Yanran probed: “Why would Fourth Brother in Law possess such a mindset?”

In a deep voice, Wang Jian divulged: “To be honest, I had arrived three days ago but chose to endure the inconveniences and stayed in a secret place outside the city. In the meantime, I sent my men into the city to seek out information as I am concerned that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai had

summoned me back by using a fake decree. Beyond my anticipation, I got wind of some alternative news. It seems like Third Brother and Crown Prince are not on good terms.”

Teng Yi questioned: “What updates did Fourth Brother receive?”

Wang Jian revealed: “Firstly, Crown Prince appears to have given permission for Third Brother and your clan to leave for the borderlands and secondly, Crown Prince and Third Brother are not as close as before. Unlike the past, Crown Prince no longer discuss his private affairs with Third Brother.”

Jing Jun sighed: “Fourth Brother’s spies are really proficient.”

Making up his mind, Xiang Shaolong invited: “Let’s enter the hall before we discuss any further!”

Sitting themselves in the inner hall, Wang Jian coldly grunted: “This time round, I have brought thirty thousand crack troops back with me. They are the best of the best and every single one of them is willing to die for me, Wang Jian. Fighting against these mere rebels? I only need to point my finger and I guarantee their absolute destruction.”

He then sighed with a breath of air: “However, I am worried about Crown Prince and the possibility of him trying to harm Third Brother. As Crown Prince matures with age, he has become more and more formidable.”

Everyone can easily deduce that Wang Jian must have received news about Yingzheng’s questionable heritage and

is therefore making this assumption. To prevent Xiang Shaolong from being awkward and also as a sign of trust in Xiang Shaolong, he did not directly confront him.

The news of Yingzheng beheading Qian Zhi has taken the entire State by the storm. There is no reason for Wang Jian to be ignorant about it.

The ten eyes of Tao Fang, Ji Yanran, Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Wu Guo are all focused on Xiang Shaolong, letting him decide his explanation to Wang Jian.

Xiang Shaolong broke out into a wide smile: "Fourth Brother is truly worthy of the title: Qin's Top General. You had barely came back and your intelligence of Xianyang is so comprehensive."

He is indirectly affirming Wang Jian's presumptions.

His eyes shimmering with brilliance, Wang Jian professed: "My enemies are the dim-witted Xiongnu while Third Brother is contending against the allied forces of the five eastern States. Since when did I, Wang Jian, become the top general?"

Pausing, Wang Jian went straight to the point: "Whatever Third Brother wants me, Fourth Brother to do, I will do exactly as per your instructions. You can speak without any reservations."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing. Stretching his hands and grabbing Wang Jian's broad shoulders, he cheerfully exclaimed: "I want Fourth Brother to cleanse our State,

wiping out all traces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. And assist Yingzheng in uniting the lands and build the Great Empire of Qin. In the process, Fourth Brother shall become the most illustrious general in the records of history.”

At this point in time, Qin has two Great Generals and they are Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian. From the perspective of the Court of Qin, both men enjoy the highest respect and accolades internally and externally. Within the military, their standing is even more prominent.

If the two of them choose to work together, they will definitely pose a viable threat to Yingzheng.

However, Xiang Shaolong chose to simply reject Wang Jian’s suggestion and thereby preventing a Qin’s internal strife.

Of course the others do not know that Xiang Shaolong had already understood this fact from history: Nobody can hope to overcome Qin Shihuang. As a result, he dared not even harbour any thoughts of staging his own rebellion.

Unconsciously, he won Wang Jian’s praises of admiration but Xiang Shaolong modestly expressed: “Fourth Brother is giving me too much credit. There are many areas that I would have to rely on you.”

In a solemn tone, Wang Jian described: “In the history of our Great Qin, Crown Prince can be considered our wisest and most scheming ruler, while Li Si’s capabilities is not inferior to Shang Yang. But if we are talking about meeting on the battlefield, I, Wang Jian, fear nobody except Third Brother and Li Mu. In terms of scheming, you can never be safe

against underhand methods. What are Third Brother's plans?"

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Is Fourth Brother aware of Crown Prince's military deployment?"

Wang Jian unabashedly shared: "The main strength of Crown Prince lies mainly in the Imperial Palace Guards and the Imperial Cavalry. Lately, the Palace Guards have been actively recruiting personnel and their strength has been boosted to fifty thousand. Regardless of training, equipment and remuneration, they are far better off compared to the other forces. In addition, they are fiercely loyal towards Crown Prince. They are the ones Third Brother have to guard against."

Xiang Shaolong recalled that day when Lord Changwen chased up to him from the palace and advised himself to give up his plans to leave for the borderlands. Unfortunately, he was rejected unreservedly by Xiang Shaolong.

After all, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are members of the royal family. Blood is thicker than water. In case of a dispute, they would definitely side with Xiao Pan.

Wang Jian added: "Against these rebels, Crown Prince should have logically summoned Huan Qi back. Instead, he summoned An Guxi all the way back from the Qin-Chu Border. Based on this point alone, I am certain that he has the intention to confront Third Brother."

Teng Yi was thunderstruck: "An Guxi is back? Why are we kept in the dark?"

In a deep voice, Wang Jian established: "This is Crown Prince's secret attack force. However, I have yet to determine the size of his army. I only know that he has left the border and is camped somewhere between Xianyang and Yongdu. Upon receiving the royal decree, he can reach Xianyang or Yongdu within a day."

Like Lord Changping and Lord Changwen, An Guxi is a member of the royal family and would definitely support Yingzheng in times of trouble. No wonder Wang Jian could speculate that Yingzheng is having unfavourable thoughts about Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong solemnly swore: "I don't give a hoot about his deployments. As long as Fourth Brother can secure the fake Xiang Shaolong's departure from Yongdu, we have the ability to handle the rest."

Wu Guo smiled: "It is true that we have to depend on Master Jian to take good care of my measly little life."

As Wang Jian stared at Wu Guo with a flabbergasted expression, Ji Yanran swiftly explained their ruse in her melodious voice.

Wang Jian bitterly laughed: "If your ruse is exposed, Third Brother would be found guilty of deceiving the King!"

Teng Yi grudgingly smiled: "This is a risk we have to undertake. If Fourth Brother has seen Wu Guo in action, you too, would feel confident that we can pull this through."

Ji Yanran giggled: "Additionally, your Third Brother will be faking an illness, making it easier to proceed with the impersonation."

Wang Jian suggested: "If the switch can be made halfway through the journey, it would be perfect!"

Xiang Shaolong was elated: "With Fourth Brother supporting at the side, it has increased our conviction drastically. Meanwhile, it is not convenient for Fourth Brother to stay for too long."

After finalizing their future secret communication methods, Wang Jian furtively slipped away.

Xiang Shaolong left in search for Xiao Yuetan and found him sitting in front of a bronze mirror and disguising himself as an old man. He promptly updated him about Wang Jian's collaboration.

Xiao Yuetan nodded: "Judging from his bearing and appearance, it is unmistakably clear that this man places heavy emphasis on brotherhood and is not someone who will cower to the rich and powerful. With him secretly providing assistance, the odds of our success have increased by several folds."

Turning puzzled, he quizzed: "Don't you need to attend morning court?"

Xiang Shaolong explained: "That is why I am looking for you. I have to trouble Elder Brother to apply some make-up for me and give me a sickly appearance."

With an amused expression, Xiao Yuetan scoffed: "Shaolong has underestimated Yingzheng. If he learns about your sickness, he would surely send a royal physician to treat your disease and concurrently investigate the truth about your illness claims. Shaolong's fraud would be exposed by just a simple diagnosis."

Xiang Shaolong was horrified: "What should I do?!"

Glancing at the sky, Xiao Yuetan calculated: "Fortunately, there is still time, because Yingzheng can only send for the royal physician after the morning court session. I shall leave at once and gather some herbs for you. After consumption, these herbs will trigger your pulse to become unstable without any side effects. We can then deceive Yingzheng and prevent him from growing suspicious towards you."

With regards to Xiao Yuetan's knowledge and skills, Xiang Shaolong has nothing but respect and admiration. He was secretly gratified that Lu Buwei has tried to harm Xiao Yuetan, forcing him to switch sides. Otherwise, Xiao Yuetan would probably become his most feared enemy right now.

That very afternoon, as Xiao Yuetan had forecasted, Xiao Pan sent two Imperial Physicians to attend to Xiang Shaolong's medical condition. Even Lord Changping was also here to see him.

After the two doctors felt his pulse, both unequivocally diagnosed that Xiang Shaolong's has over-exerted his physical body and has therefore caught the flu bug.

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong gingerly lead them on, causing them to believe without a doubt that root of his sickness was due to long exposure to snowy wilderness during his fugitive days.

Once the Imperial Physicians retreated out of the room, Lord Changping sat down on his beside. With a heavy expression, he sighed with a breath, appearing to be in a dilemma over what he wants to say to Xiang Shaolong.

Putting on a feeble act, Xiang Shaolong muttered: "What is troubling Your Lordship?"

Lord Changping sighed: "Aye! My mind is in a quandary. On one hand, I wish Shaolong can remain sick and bedridden but on the other hand, I wanted Shaolong to recover in due time. Aye!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel the warmth in his heart. Strongly gripping Lord Changping's hand, he whispered: "I understand everything. Your Lordship need not speak any further."

An agitated Lord Changping stammered: "You... ..."

Revealing a bittersweet smile on his face, Xiang Shaolong pondered in a deep voice: "Serving a king is like walking with tigers; this is an age old truth. Let's not talk these things anymore. Is Ying Ying happy? How is Duanhe treating her?"

His eye sockets filled with hot tears, Lord Changping decisively declared: "Our prosperity and attainment today is all thanks to Shaolong's endorsement and patronage. If we,

the two brothers, can sit by and do nothing while Shaolong is in trouble, can we be considered humans? Crown Prince is obviously the one at fault.”

Xiang Shaolong is touched. He gently advised: “Regarding these matters, there is no right and wrong. Please do not bear any grudges towards Crown Prince. Little Brother has a way to preserve my life.”

Wiping his tears with his sleeve, Lord Changping divulged after a short contemplation: “Shaolong must guard against this man named Wei Liao. He hails from Daliang, Capital of Wei. After arriving in Qin, he has become a resident advisor under Crown Prince and is highly regarded by him. In fact, there are several matters that Crown Prince would consult him instead of us. This man is extremely shrewd and talented in military maneuvers. He authored the military manuscript ‘Wei Liao Strategies’, driving the main concept: Attack small to grow big; one to rule them all, which largely coincides with our Great Qin’s ambition to unite the States. Crown Prince is probably influenced by him and is pushing the agenda for conquering the other States. Whoever that opposes his grand plan of uniting the lands are mercilessly beheaded.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his predicament.

Lord Changping is hinting him that Xiao Pan is going all out to get rid of him in order to preserve his kingly authority and wishes for him to remain sick in bed. Indirectly, he is

insinuating that if Xiang Shaolong were to accompany Xiao Pan to Yongdu, certain death awaits him.

Noting that this Wei Liao is not holding an official post, Xiang Shaolong is convinced that he has been specially selected by Xiao Pan to deal with himself. This is because the talented officials under Xiao Pan are all hardcore buddies of Xiang Shaolong. To get rid of himself, Xiao Pan has to engage an 'outsider'.

Lord Changping added: "Did Shaolong notice that Li Si has changed a lot? We no longer adore him like before; he is too desperate for power and authority."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling moved again, recognizing Lord Changping's intention to warn him about Li Si. Nonetheless, only he can truly comprehend Li Si's situation. In reality, Li Si is even more passionate about pursuing the dream of conquering all the States and uniting all the territories; it is his ultimate goal in life. As a result, he was forced to do whatever he can to please Xiao Pan. Li Si, after all, did risk his own life to advise Xiang Shaolong to flee for his life, clearly demonstrating the genuine friendship that exists in his heart.

Patting Lord Changping's hand, Xiang Shaolong grinned: "Go back and make your report to Crown Prince! Tell him I will definitely accompany him to Yongdu."

As Lord Changping is still reeling from shock, Xiang Shaolong winked at him several times. Although he does not have a clue about his plans, Lord Changping got the message after

identifying Xiang Shaolong's look of confidence and left him as it is.

For the next three days, Xiao Pan continued to send Imperial Physicians to attend to him.

By now, it is only ten days until the trip to Yongdu. Xiang Shaolong pretended to recover slightly and entered the palace to seek an audience with Xiao Pan with lesser 'sickly' make up.

After being informed of his arrival, Xiao Pan personally received him at the palace entrance, putting up a good show of respect.

Concluding a round of pleasantries, Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong adjourned to the Imperial Study to begin their secret meeting.

This future Qin Shihuang heaved with a sigh of relief: "It is a blessing that Great General is able to recover in time. Otherwise, without Great General beside Guaren providing pointers, stratagems and countering the rebels, it would be disastrous."

Xiang Shaolong carefully scrutinized this King of Qin whom he had personally raised. Momentarily, his heart is overwhelmed with countless emotions clashing with one another and he could no longer differentiate between love and hate. As instructed by Xiao Yuetan, he queried in a hoarse voice: "Is everything ready?"

Xiao Pan nodded: "We are all set. Wang Jian is back and he had brought along an army of thirty thousand crack troops, every one of them a brave and experienced war veteran. Guaren has assigned him to a location near Yongdu as per our deployments."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "What are your plans?"

With a tinge of awkwardness, Xiao Pan articulated: "According to Mao Jiao's spy reports, Lao Ai is planning to activate his forces and begin the rebellion on the night of the coronation when everyone is drunk and asleep from all the celebrations. When that happens, Wang Jian will besiege Yongdu with his men, trapping Lao Ai and his accomplices."

Xiang Shaolong deliberately put on an air of displeasure: "Since Wang Jian is back, why didn't he come to visit me?"

Xiao Pan hurriedly explained: "It is Guaren who had prohibited him from entering the City. Great General must not misjudge him."

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Any news from Lu Buwei's camp?"

His royal eyes turning icy, Xiao Pan frostily hissed: "In the meantime, what can he amount to? However, it will be a different story when Guaren lead my civil and military officials to Yongdu."

Seemingly afraid of meeting Xiang Shaolong's gaze, Xiao Pan lowered his head and continued in a deep voice: "After the departure of Guaren and Great General, Advisor Wei Liao

will remain behind in Xianyang and assume command of the City. To deal with Lu Buwei, he shall be bestowed with Guaren's Tiger Seal and he has complete autonomy to deploy the three armies of Xianyang. Guaren shall announce this tomorrow morning during the Court session."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger mounting. Despite his nice sounding words, Xiao Pan is actually relieving Teng Yi and Jing Jun of their military command.

At the end of the day, the Qin military is fiercely loyal to the royal family. If Teng Yi and Jing Jun are unable to deploy the Imperial Cavalry, Xiang Shaolong would be handicapped in the showdown between him and Lu Buwei.

To make it worse, Wei Liao would have complete jurisdiction over any killings.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, disagreeing: "This arrangement is illogical. Presently, the Imperial Infantry is controlled by the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. Wei Liao is a fresh face and lack battle accomplishments. Not only would he be unable to win the respect of the soldiers, it would dampen the morale of the Imperial Cavalry. This proposal is impractical. Would Crown Prince please reconsider?"

Xiao Pan still retains some fear of Xiang Shaolong and on top of that, he has a guilty conscience. After a short contemplation, he clarified: "Essentially, Guaren's strategy is strictly aimed at Lu Buwei. If he tries to manipulate the deployments of the Imperial Cavalry, we can charge him

with treason. With reason on our side, Wei Liao can simply exterminate him and his followers. Hey! Of course we would require the collaboration of the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun.”

Though Xiang Shaolong’s deep-set eyes are flickering with a chilling sensation, he plainly concluded in a calm tone: “You can simply promote Wei Liao to become the Imperial Infantry Commander!”

Xiao Pan was perplexed: “But this is a pointblank offensive against Lu Buwei; that Traitor would never give his consent.”

Xiang Shaolong stated with indifference: “In this case, Crown Prince can simply hand your Tiger Seal to Teng Yi. Once the coronation hour has passed, Crown Prince shall become the King of Qin. Without Empress’s approval, Crown Prince can control the armies of Xianyang at will. Isn’t it better than causing unnecessary alarm?”

He is convinced that Xiao Pan needed to coax himself to Yongdu and would not clash with him at this point in time. Since Xiao Pan is evidently inferior in terms of courage, Xiang Shaolong used this golden opportunity to ask for the sky and watch how Xiao Pan would respond.

In reality, Xiao Pan cannot be bothered with the Imperial Infantry and had wanted to regain control of the Imperial Cavalry. But of course he could not say it outright.

After a lengthy pause, Xiao Pan finally relented: “Since you say so, I shall stick to the original military appointments. Wei Liao will encamp outside Xianyang City with his forces and

whenever necessary, he shall supplement the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly humoured. Even if Wei Liao has three heads and six arms, he would not know that Xiang Shaolong is the real mastermind behind Xianyang’s deployments and is bound to be at a disadvantage.

No longer interested in idle chatter with Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong used his lingering sickness as an excuse to return home.

CHAPTER 6

Thick Clouds Of War

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

BACK at Wu Residence, Xiang Shaolong learnt that Qin Qing is here and found her with Ji Yanran in the hall, whispering secretively to each other. Both ladies wore a heavy expression on their faces and forcefully mustered a smile at the sight of him.

A bewildered Xiang Shaolong sat and questioned: "Why are the two of you in a state of anxiety?"

Ji Yanran explained: "Crown Prince has officially decreed Sister Qing to accompany him to Yongdu in order to assist

him with the coronation procedures. Sister Qing is feeling distressed over this. She cannot afford to disobey the decree and yet, it is not ideal for her to go to Yongdu.”

Xiang Shaolong violently trembled: “No one knows me better than Yingzheng. He has hit me at my Achilles Heel.”

With a frantic expression, Qin Qing dismissed in a melancholic tone: “Just leave without me. I don’t think he has the guts to vent his frustration on me. After the dust has settled, I will look for you people at the borderlands!”

Recomposing himself, Xiang Shaolong shook his head decisively and declared: “No! If we are leaving, we will leave together. Otherwise, the heart wrenching pain of pining for each other will torture me to no ends.”

Listening to Xiang Shaolong’s emotional outburst, Qin Qing is so touched her lovely eyes begin to turn red.

Ji Yanran suggested: “Yanran can disguise myself as Sister Qing’s personal maid and can react to any unforeseen circumstances.”

Briefly dazed, Xiang Shaolong agreed: “That’s a good plan and the enemy would not anticipate it. If necessary, I can get Jing Jun to personally fetch both of you at Yongdu. In terms of ninja climbing skills, who can hold a candle to him?”

Qin Qing wondered: “I would like to learn about Hubby Xiang’s ninja climbing skills. Are you willing to teach me?”

Hearing her words, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran stared at each other with a flabbergasted countenance. Qin Qing is

such a civilized, prim and proper beauty. If she were to pick up the climbing skills of the Wu Family Special Forces, how would she eventually turn out?

That night, Xiao Yuetan leisurely strolled back.

Everyone quickly gathered in the secret room for a discussion.

Xiao Yuetan started: "If not for Master Tu keeping Traitor Lu under secret surveillance, as we walk down the path of reincarnation, we would remain as muddle-headed ghosts."

Everyone flinched and swiftly pressed him for details.

Xiao Yuetan clarified: "Lu Buwei is now facing a shortage of reliable talents and had no choice but to assign heavy responsibilities to his pioneering family warriors which Master Tu headed. Hence, Master Tu is able to comprehend the finer details of Traitor Lu's schemes."

Ji Yanran exposed: "Of late, Lu Buwei has kept a low profile and appeared to be vulnerable and in a state of decline. So it is just an act."

Jing Jun antagonistically cursed: "This time round, we must tear him to shreds."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "We have neglected Lu Buwei's last trick in the bag: His allies from the Six Eastern States. Among the Kings of the six States, each and every one of them views Yingzheng as a savage beast that will devour everything in its path. In order to topple Yingzheng, they are willing to pay

any price. In their opinion, if Lao Ai can end up as the King of Qin, it would be even better.”

Xiang Shaolong's face turned pale: “Would he have the audacity to open up the passes and simply allow the allied army to pass through?”

Xiao Yuetan chortled: “Even if he possesses the guts to do so, it would be futile. The soldiers of Qin love their country and would not carry out the order. In addition, the Three States, Chu and Yan are severely handicapped by Shaolong's assault. Even if we open up the passes, their armies would not have the conviction to proceed with the invasion. Nevertheless, the six States has dispatched four teams of kamikaze desperados, each of them a highly skilled fighter who is able to fight off a hundred men. At an opportune moment, they will execute their well-planned assassination attempt. Their four targets are Yingzheng, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping and Li Si.”

Of course Yingzheng and Xiang Shaolong would be among the chosen targets.

Lord Changping and Li Si are the top military and civil officials of Yingzheng. If they are out of the picture, the hundreds of civil and military officials would be leaderless, giving Lu Buwei a chance to take charge.

Xiang Shaolong thought: The person they should really try to assassinate is Wang Jian. However, Lu Buwei is probably still in the dark about Wang Jian's return.

Presently, the State of Qin is undergoing a critical period in its evolution. The minute Xiao Pan ascends the throne; the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will perish without a burial place.

Tao Fang enquired in a deep voice: "Are these men in Xianyang?"

Xiao Yuetan answered: "To conceal their presence, they are holing up in the nearby mountain caves and forests while their food rations are provided by Master Tu. Ladies and Gentlemen, you should realize what a favourable arrangement this is."

Ji Yanran inquired: "Is Manager Tu aware of their plans and details?"

Xiao Yuetan disclosed: "With regards to this, Imperial Infantry Commander Xu Shang is the one with all the information. As long as we can capture him alive, I would be able to force a confession out of him."

Teng Yi professed: "If Xu Shang steps out of the City, we would be able to capture him alive for Mister's interrogation. But if he stations himself within the Command Centre, we are powerless unless we chose to attack him head on."

Xu Shang himself is a master swordsman and is a resident of Imperial Uncle Residence. Wherever he goes, he would be escorted by a sizable entourage of bodyguards. Within the Command Centre, it is a concentration of his men and

influence. Killing him might be workable but capturing him alive is going to be an incredible feat.

From his bosom, Xiao Yuetan produced a roll of parchment. Spreading it across the table, he narrated: "This is a complete blueprint of Imperial Uncle Residence, including all the defensive traps and hidden rooms. If we employ certain strategies instead of brute force, it is quite possible for us to assassinate Lu Buwei and kidnap Xu Shang."

Pausing, he added: "Master Tu has prepared a powerful anesthetic; if we put it in the drinking wells of Imperial Uncle Residence, its consumers can forget about waking up within three days."

Jing Jun cheered: "That's brilliant!"

Xiang Shaolong probed: "Since Senior Tu did participate in Lu Buwei's confidential meetings, did he manage to learn about his complete scheme?"

Xiao Yuetan icily grinned: "Even if Master Tu did not participate in the meetings, Traitor Lu cannot pull the wool over his eyes. Traitor Lu's plan is to unleash two simultaneous attacks. When Lao Ai is staging his rebellion at Yongdu, he would launch his own uprising at Xianyang and kill everyone who opposes him."

Pausing, he continued: "It is imperative to successfully assassinate Yingzheng. With Yingzheng dead, Lu Buwei can use the excuse of attacking Lao Ai and obtain full military control of Qin.

Tao Fang frowned: "If Lao Ai failed in his rebellion, wouldn't Traitor Lu's beautiful dream end up in smoke? And he would be labeled as a stinking insurgent."

Xiao Yuetan enlightened: "That's why Traitor Lu has instructed Guan Zhongxie to proceed to Yongdu to meet up with the experts from the six States and oversee their assassination maneuvers. Based on his remarkable archery skills, he has a decent shot at success. At the end of the day, Yingzheng is not familiar with layout of Yongdu."

Everybody is in a state of agitation. If they do not act first and get rid of this man, he would become a most fearful threat.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "We did suspect this move from Lu Buwei; unfortunately, it turned out to be true. Is there any way to pinpoint Guan Zhongxie's location?"

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: "This is the Old Thief's last and most powerful weapon. Except for himself, nobody else knows about Guan Zhongxie's movement. The success or failure of Traitor Lu is resting on the deciding death of Yingzheng, and he does have a fair chance of victory."

Ji Yanran pointed out: "Wouldn't Wu Guo be in an extremely dangerous position?"

Wu Guo's face is completely drained of blood. However, no one will blame him for being frightened after taking into account Guan Zhongxie's supreme archery skills.

Stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan guffawed: "Dear all, this is called thinking too much. Actually, Guan Zhongxie is not absolutely untraceable. After all, his first target has to be Yingzheng. An alternative is assaulting the four targets simultaneously in order not to raise the alarm and lose the element of surprise."

Wu Guo instantly heaved a sigh of relief.

Ji Yanran deduced: "In this sense, the assassination attempts should be concentrated in Yongdu. Only in this instance can they frame Lao Ai for the murders."

She went on with a smile: "Those well versed in warfare will overcome their enemies by strategy instead of numbers. The biggest weakness of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's collaboration is their mutual distrust and mutual scheming. According to Yanran's estimate, it is likely that Lu Buwei did not reveal to Lao Ai about his assassination plans and has planted spies among the followers of Crown Prince. If we manage to leak the assassination plans to Lao Ai, we may gain some unexpected benefits."

Xiang Shaolong is not the least worried about Xiao Pan's royal life; otherwise, history would not have records of this person known as Qin Shihuang. In the same context, he is not worried about Lord Changping and Li Si too.

At this point, Teng Yi commented: "The best way is to kill Guan Zhongxie beforehand and indirectly safeguard ourselves. If anything were to happen to me and Little Jun, Traitor Lu can simply seize control of the Imperial Cavalry."

Guan Zhongxie is gifted warrior and an astute strategist. With him masterminding the assassins from the six States, who would dare to be complacent.

Xiao Yuetan suddenly proposed: "With Wu Guo disguised as Shaolong, Shaolong can concurrently impersonate Wu Guo. That would be a perfect scenario."

Everyone was full of praise and cheers.

Tao Fang wondered: "Is there enough time?"

Xiao Yuetan happily laughed: "When I was making the first mask, I already thought of this and made both masks instead. That's why I ended up taking so much time!"

Everyone took turns in commending Xiao Yuetan for his brilliance and is full of admiration for his wisdom and foresight.

Subsequently, they discussed the details of their deployments and decided that their utmost priority is to track down Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, they made special provisions in case of unforeseen circumstances.

That night, Xiang Shaolong had a very good rest and intentionally appeared during the morning court session, allowing Lu Buwei and the others to witness his sickly appearance and hear his hoarse voice.

The court session that morning was mainly centered on the affairs of the approaching coronation.

Lu Buwei actively persisted on staying behind and guarding Xianyang while Xiao Pan pretended to lose the debate and accepted his proposal with reluctance.

After the morning court session, the five men Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and Li Si adjourned to the Imperial Study for their private meeting.

Lord Changping and Li Si submitted their reports first and both their reports are concerning the Yongdu coronation process.

At the end of their submission, Xiao Pan narrated: "Officials (All of you) should know that this is the last opportunity for the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai to topple Guaren. In this aspect, what propositions would Officials recommend?"

Lord Changwen reported: "Your subordinate has made detailed preparations with regards to this matter. First of all, the ships sailing to Yongdu shall be similar looking and all of them will bear the royal flag, making it difficult for the enemy to pinpoint the actual ship that Guaren is sailing on. In addition, several mini battleships shall pave the way for us. Lastly, there will be elite soldiers lying in ambush in all the critical parts of the shore, guaranteeing a safe journey."

Xiao Pan nodded his head and praised his work before reminding: "Nonetheless, the main danger would lie in Yongdu. For many years, Lao Ai has been making preparations just for this one day. We cannot afford to be complacent."

Lord Changping added: "Guxi will first lead ten thousand elite soldiers into Yongdu and secure all the exits and entrances. Subordinate has confidence that Lao Ai would not dare to challenge him."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "When did Senior General An come back?"

Xiao Pan dryly coughed once and explained: "As Great General is at home and recuperating, Guaren dare not disturb and thus, did not tell Great General about his return."

Li Si and the other two men lowered their head and kept their silence.

Xiang Shaolong furiously state: "Crown Prince is well-prepared and certainly do not require subordinate's presence and advice. Why don't subordinate remain in Xianyang and continue my recuperation?"

The heads of Li Si and the other two sank even lower.

Without any signs of fluster, Xiao Pan corrected: "Great General, you must not jump to conclusions. Guaren is now seeking your advice."

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "If you do not make known to subordinate about your deployments and the available soldiers, be prepared to fail."

Including Xiao Pan, the four men were taken aback.

Xiang Shaolong thought: This is called: I don't usually speak, but when I do, you can expect some nerve-racking words. After receiving the precious intelligence reports from Tu Xian, he is much more confident in fighting this double war; the first war is against the gangs of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai; the second war is against the heartless fellow Xiao Pan.

With a serious demeanour, Xiao Pan questioned: "What does Great General mean?"

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew that Xiao Pan places a heavy emphasis on the meaning behind his words. Moreover, since he was young, Xiao Pan has always regarded himself as an infallible immortal. In addition, Xiang Shaolong has assisted Xiao Pan in resolving many of his difficulties and his standing in Xiao Pan's heart is irreplaceable.

If it was somebody else, be it Wang Jian or Li Si, they would not have the same chilling effect on this future Qin Shihuang.

Instead of answering, Xiang Shaolong plainly interrogated: "How many men did Senior General An brought back from the Qin-Chu border?"

After some hesitation, Xiao Pan helplessly replied: "Fifty thousand."

Scrutinizing the expression of the others, Xiang Shaolong is convinced that Xiao Pan did not lie to him about this matter. Without the slightest hint of surprise, he probed: "Where are the other forty thousand men stationed at? Who is in charge of them?"

Of course Xiang Shaolong is well aware that the huge army is not solely here to get rid of Lu Buwei; they would be used to attack Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Wu Family Warriors as well but he intentionally forced Xiao Pan to confess so.

Xiao Pan appears to be afraid of facing Xiang Shaolong's glare and pretended to flip through several documents on his table. With an air of nonchalance, he responded: "They are the reserve army which I prepared for cases of emergency. With Wei Liao at the helm, they can swiftly supplement the forces of Yongdu or Xianyang by taking the river route."

Subsequently, he reminded with some impatience: "Great General has yet to answer Guaren's question."

Under the sky, only Xiang Shaolong would dare to speak with Xiao Pan in this manner.

Li Si and the others dare not interrupt.

Xiang Shaolong simply rationalized: "However brazen they can be, the gangs of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai would not throw eggs at stone by staging an open rebellion. Therefore, I am convinced that they will try to employ a secret assassination attempt. If they can successfully get rid of Crown Prince, chaos will descend and the traitors can reap benefits from the state of disorder. They will end up as the biggest winners."

Lord Changping cannot help but interject: "We already thought of that and have implemented appropriate countermeasures."

Xiang Shaolong articulated in a deep voice: "Imagine a scenario whereby the head of the assassination team is Guan Zhongxie and the participants are top assassins from the other six States, each of them painstakingly chosen from thousands of candidates and has undergone vigorous training. On top of that, Crown Prince has to expose himself to the public during the coronation ceremony and there are also spies within the Palace Guards aiding the assassins. Is Your Lordship as surefooted as before?"

Including Xiao Pan, everyone's countenance underwent a drastic change.

Years ago, on the way to Deshui for the Spring Sacrifice, Xiao Pan's entourage was ambushed. Luckily, the decoy carriage was attacked but the memory of the incident is still fresh in their minds. With the deadly marksman Guan Zhongxie involved in the latest assault, who can guarantee that everything will be fine.

Lord Changping was thunderstruck: "According to the messengers, Guan Zhongxie is still in Han territory, locking horns with the people of Han."

Xiang Shaolong dismissed: "That's a sham. In this critical juncture, there is no reason for Lu Buwei to not summon his beloved son-in-law back. This is called: Feeding an army for days, unlocking their value in one battle."

Xiang Shaolong's words are highly persuasive and plausible; no one doubts his theory.

His royal eyes flickering, Xiao Pan glared at Xiang Shaolong and grilled: "Where did Great General get your information from?"

Xiang Shaolong has already anticipated this question from Xiao Pan and replied with a smile: "Lu Buwei has friends in the six States and so does subordinate."

Xiao Pan stared blankly at him for a short spell and nodded: "What solutions do Great General advocate?"

Taking full advantage of his superior bargaining position, Xiang Shaolong demanded: "For a start, Crown Prince has to grant subordinate your Tiger Seal, giving subordinate the ability to deploy the military at will. Only then can subordinate find a remedy to this problem."

This is Xiang Shaolong's most astounding move and there is no basis for Xiao Pan to reject him. For the different ranks of commanders and generals, they are presented with a different Tiger Seal that reflects their rank and identity. In the same context, the Tiger Seal will limit the amount of soldiers they can bring into battle.

For those who are ranked Senior General and above, there is no limit on their army strength. Wherever they may be, they can recruit or deploy soldiers at will.

After every war and upon their return to Xianyang, the generals and commanders must surrender half of their Tiger Seal to the Court. The soldiers will be re-assigned back to their original barracks and the generals will be left with their personal soldiers. The personal soldiers of each general will

vary based on their ranks. At the end of the day, the control of the military will reconsolidate in the hands of the King.

Being one of the two Great Generals of Qin, if Xiang Shaolong possess the complete Tiger Seal, he is as good as the Chief Commander. When that happens, except for Xiao Pan, no one can retract his authority.

As a result, with both halves of the Tiger Seal, Xiang Shaolong wields absolute authority over the soldiers of Qin. If Xiao Pan wishes to harm him, he cannot utilize Wei Liao who is a new and lowly ranked commander. The only possibility is for Xiao Pan to attack Xiang Shaolong in person.

This clearly demonstrates the importance of the Tiger Seal.

For three reasons, Xiang Shaolong is confident that Xiao Pan will acquiesce to his request.

Firstly, Xiao Pan is under the impression that Xiang Shaolong is always by his side. After arriving in Yongdu, Xiao Pan can easily demand the return of the Tiger Seal. It is not as if Xiang Shaolong is fighting a distant battle and can choose to disobey Xiao Pan's decree.

Secondly, Xiang Shaolong had deliberately painted this scenario, forcing Xiao Pan to accede to his demands in order to placate and continue deceiving Xiang Shaolong.

Thirdly and best of all, Xiao Pan's trust in Xiang Shaolong's capabilities are deep-rooted. Furthermore, Xiao Pan fully believes that Xiang Shaolong would not bear to harm him.

As a result, Xiang Shaolong is not anxious about Xiao Pan's decision. Additionally, Xiao Pan cannot make enquiries about his plans, as it is tantamount to distrust.

As anticipated, Xiao Pan was briefly dazed before nodding his royal head in agreement: "As per Great General's request!"

Suppressing his overwhelming exhilaration, Xiang Shaolong plainly swore: "The day of Crown Prince's coronation shall be the day subordinate presents the head of Guan Zhongxie. If I fail in my duty, Crown Prince can punish me according to the military laws."

An extremely complicated look flashed past the eyes of Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself and took this opportunity to retreat.

CHAPTER 7

Unorthodox Interrogation

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

LORD CHANGWEN chased up to Xiang Shaolong from the back. Riding side by side, their horses unhurriedly galloped along the road while the Guardians and Lord Changwen's bodyguards carefully scrutinized their surroundings for any signs of danger. Armed with human-sized shields and holding their bows, they kept a strict lookout for possible assassins. It was a tense atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong casually checked: "Don't you need to attend to Crown Prince?"

Lord Changwen shook his head and probed: "What are Shaolong's plans against the rebels? Can you share some information with me? I may be able to lend you a hand."

With an air of indifference, Xiang Shaolong grilled: "Was it Crown Prince who ordered you to chase up to me and ask these questions?"

Revealing a stunned look, Lord Changwen is unable to answer him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You can save it. I understand your difficulties."

His face darkening, Lord Changwen shamefully implored: "Can Shaolong help me out?"

Xiang Shaolong narrated: "You can report to Crown Prince that I have laid my hands on a bunch of clues, allowing me to take down Guan Zhongxie and the assassins of the six States in one fell swoop. Nevertheless, I would need to operate under full secrecy for my strategy to succeed. Therefore, with lesser people aware of my plans, the better it is for me."

Lord Changwen hastily enquired: "What's the purpose behind Shaolong's request for the Tiger Seal?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: Of course it is a life preservation tactic. Instead, he answered: "Because I would need to deploy thirty thousand Imperial Cavalry soldiers in my quest to exterminate these trespassing invaders."

Pausing, he asked in return: "What is Wei Liao's present rank?"

With a look of dilemma on his face, Lord Changwen lowered his head and responded: "I am not very sure."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Ultimately, Lord Changwen is inferior to his elder brother in terms of brotherhood loyalty. Sharing weal is easy; sharing woe is a different story.

Thinking about this, Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered with his company.

With a "Please return!" Xiang Shaolong and the Guardians sped away. Back at his Command Centre, he immediately summoned the three men: Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Guo. After updating them about the Tiger Seal incident, he asserted: "Presently, we are considered untouchable. Unless Yingzheng personally leads an army against me, nobody else can lay a finger on us."

Teng Yi frowned: "However, Yingzheng can issue a decree to confiscate Third Brother's military authority."

Xiang Shaolong grinned: "That's the best part. To make sure that I get rid of Guan Zhongxie, Yingzheng would not recall the Tiger Seal before the coronation. By the time he wishes to act against my interests, he would discover my absence at Yongdu. During that period, we could enjoy a few days of complete freedom and focus all our energies on countering Lu Buwei."

Wu Guo nodded: "In this case, I must make my getaway before the end of the coronation ceremony."

Jing Jun wondered: "Are we really going after Guan Zhongxie?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "Just take it that we are giving Yingzheng a huge farewell present before our departure!"

Teng Yi agreed: "We must do it; otherwise, if Traitor Lu happens to succeed in his scheme, we can forget about enjoying our days in peace."

Xiang Shaolong proposed: "As long as we can capture all the members of one of the assassination teams that are concealed in the mountains or wilderness, and with Tu Xian concealing this development from Lu Buwei, we could execute our torturous interrogation methods and discover the location of Guan Zhongxie."

Wu Guo was puzzled: "I am still confused; instead of using the opportunity to head to Yongdu, why are the assassins still loitering near Xianyang?"

Jing Jun questioned: "Three days later, Yingzheng shall proceed to Yongdu. When does Third Brother plan to strike?"

Revealing a self-satisfying and self-confident smile, Xiang Shaolong simply decided: "Tonight! Let these men have a taste of our well-trained and seasoned Wu Family Special Forces."

The three men stammered in shock: “Special Forces?”

Xiang Shaolong contentedly nodded.

Because of his 21st century scientific knowledge, Xiang Shaolong is able to recreate this ancient Special Forces team that employs the best battle techniques, allowing him to accomplish many missions that were originally insurmountable. Out of the blue, he can feel his chest swelling with infinite fighting spirit.

Under the brilliance of the bright moon, Xiang Shaolong who was disguised as Wu Guo is in a prone position with Ji Yanran beside him. They are waiting patiently on a cliff about six miles south of Xianyang City.

Armed with foldable crossbows, they are dressed in light jungle clothes. Underneath their clothes is a special armored vest, something similar to the 21st century bulletproof vest.

Now lying on the soft grass of the cliff, Xiang Shaolong reached out and patted the thigh of Ji Yanran who is sitting beside him. He softly remarked: “I hope Wu Guo don’t screw up.”

Tonight is the first time Wu Guo is entering the limelight with his Xiang Shaolong disguise. Accompanied by Teng Yi, they are meeting Xu Shang for a discussion, analyzing how the Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry can work hand in hand when Yingzheng is absent from Xianyang.

This tactic is to allay the suspicions of Xu Shang.

If Xu Shang learns that Xiang Shaolong has left the City, it will set off alarms in his head.

Lightly whining and brushing off Xiang Shaolong's invading hand, Ji Yanran frowned her brows: "Don't touch me. With your Wu Guo disguise, I forbid any intimacy."

Xiang Shaolong was humoured: "Outer beauty is deceptive; inner beauty is genuine. Even our Talented Lady doesn't realize this?"

Ji Yanran faintly sighed: "It is easier said than done. How many people can really forgo one's appearance? If a choice is available, who would choose ugliness over beauty."

At this juncture, Jing Jun crept towards both of them and whispered: "The enemies numbered between twelve to fifteen men and they have set up camp in the forest. Their only defense is a sentry. I have casted sky-wide nets (chinese idiom 天罗地网), guaranteed to capture each and every one of them."

This time round, it is truly a case of using sky-wide nets. The outstanding hunter, Jing Jun, has specially crafted dozens of large nets that can be placed on the ground or casted from the trees above.

These assassins who have sneaked into Qin are the elite warriors of the six States. Without a good strategy, killing them is easy but capturing them alive is going to be a challenge.

Jumping to his feet, Xiang Shaolong commanded: "Do it!"

Jing Jun sneaked away.

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran ascended the summit of the hill and prostrated themselves among the thick grass, overlooking the huge stretch of thick forests that lie below them.

If not for Tu Xian's accurate information, even with a massive army combing the area, it would be impossible to corner their targets like the present situation.

Out of a sudden, the sound of hoof beats can be heard about a mile away. It gradually became louder and louder, signaling its approach and is advancing towards the forest from far. Of course Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran are not the least surprised, for it is part of their scheme to force the enemies to run in the opposite direction towards the ensnaring nets.

As anticipated, the enemies reacted instantaneously. By observing the stationary birds suddenly taking flight due to the commotion, Xiang Shaolong deduced that they are fleeing in the southeast direction where the nets are.

Continuous cries of astonishment and exclamation can be heard from the forest. Minutes later, the forest resumed its natural silence.

Exchanging a smile, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran knew that they had succeeded. Now, all they have to do is wait for Xiao Yuetan's interrogation methods.

Altogether, thirteen men were captured. Despite their varying appearances, all of them are tall and strapping characters. In an open skirmish, Xiang Shaolong and his men may suffer injuries or even death. But with their clever tactics against these unprepared criminals, no losses were reported and the entire operation was a piece of cake.

The apprehended men obviously had a pre-arrangement, with each person holding his tongue and radiating a strong determination as if death is nothing.

After smuggling them back to Wu Residence, Xiao Yuetan gave instructions to lock them up separately. Concluding a round of observation, he chose one of the assassins to be his interrogation target. To the crowd, he explained: "This man is rather handsome looking. I am sure his lifestyle is much more enriching than the others and he would certainly enjoy the attention of many ladies. For a person like him to be willing to risk his life for this mission, I am positive he is doing it for the money and also to win the affections of a beauty. Needless to say, he is somebody who treasures his body and life."

Ji Yanran complimented: "Mister is truly an expert in human psychology. No wonder you are Manager Tu's most capable assistant."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "I am just someone who uses my brain more often! It's really nothing."

He then pleaded in a low voice: "Can Yanran excuse yourself?"

Ji Yanran realizes that he is up to something that is unsuitable for a female spectator. Despite her unwillingness, she could only compliantly retreat from the room.

When the room is only left with the three men, namely Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and Xiao Yuetan, two Wu Family Warriors escorted the selected assassin in.

The lanky and fine-looking man is in the prime of his youth. Currently, his face is portraying a ghastly look and his body is exuding an air of despondency. With mud all over him, several parts of his clothes are torn and tattered. His hands are bounded behind him and his feet are locked together by an iron chain.

The three pairs of sharp eyes are scanning his face, keeping a lookout for any changes in his facial expression.

Xiao Yuetan lightly snickered: "The person beside me is the earth-shattering figure Xiang Shaolong. Since Brother has the guts to come here, you should know what kind of person he is."

The man peeped at Xiang Shaolong once. Initially exhibiting a strange look, he then slowly nodded his head.

In their hearts, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are full of admiration for Xiao Yuetan's choice of interrogation suspect. The other men would probably remain immobile. Since this person is willing to nod his head, there is a good chance of a confession.

Xiao Yuetan gently questioned: "How do I address Brother and where are you from?"

The face of the suspect revealed traces of an internal struggle and obvious signs of distress. Eventually, he vehemently shook his head once, indicating his refusal to speak.

Xiao Yuetan burst out laughing: "Let me show you something first. Afterwards, you can decide if you want to cooperate with us or not. Strip him."

Receiving his order, the two warriors jumped into action. In the blink of an eye, the man is standing there in his birthday suit and his face is carrying a horrified expression.

At this moment, even the two men Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun cannot predict Xiao Yuetan's next move.

Xiao Yuetan gave another order and from outside the door, the sound of a trolley wheeling can be heard. There are also bizarre 'ji ji' noises, sending shivers down the spine of Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun.

Entering their sight was two Guardians pushing a huge, six feet by six feet iron cage. Inside the cage is about a hundred rats of all sizes, busily scampering around and making the 'ji ji' cries.

Jing Jun exclaimed: "Oh boy!"

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong can literally feel all his hair standing on their ends and nearly wanted to excuse himself.

Blood fully drained from his face, the man's legs softened as he kneeled down on the floor. Simultaneously, his body started trembling all over as he visualized his looming torture.

Xiao Yuetan casually remarked: "Without my explanation, Brother should have guessed the purpose of these rats. I heard these rats are especially good at digging holes. Ha!"

With a wheezing sound, the suspect nearly fainted.

Lowering his head, the good-looking man asked in a quivering voice: "Are you telling the truth?"

Xiang Shaolong challenged in an unfriendly voice: "Have you ever heard of one incident when I failed to keep my word? Nonetheless, we must be able to prove that Brother is not lying to us before we will set you free."

The man submissively nodded: "I confess."

After obtaining precious information from the suspect, Wu Guo, Teng Yi and the other Guardians happened to return. In the highest of spirits, they must be feeling gratified at successfully deceiving Xu Shang.

Wu Yan Zhe commended: "Elder Brother Guo is brilliant indeed; whenever he gets stuck in the discussion, he would start coughing. With one hand supporting his head and a bitter expression, the resemblance is uncanny."

Having excused herself earlier, Ji Yanran stepped into the hall and frowned: "Make sure you do not overdo it."

Teng Yi assured: "You can set your mind at ease. Even I had to keep reminding myself that he is not Third Brother. Their only difference is the glow in their eyes. Fortunately, others will attribute it to Shaolong's lingering sickness and will not think much of it."

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he inquired: "How is the interrogation?"

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully flashed the 'Victory' sign.

The Guardians and Wu Guo shouted and cheered in unison, nearly bringing the house down.

Jing Jun updated: "Luckily, we have Mister Xiao heading the interrogation, scaring that fellow into cooperating with us obediently. He even revealed details and answers that went beyond our questioning. It turns out that this is not some secret collaboration between the six States; it was Tian Dan masterminding the assassination all along. All the warriors are from Qi and some of them are impersonating as assassins from the other five States. Their leader is Bian Dongshan, Cao Qiudao's top disciple and he reportedly has learnt the essence of Cao Qiudao's skills. Lan Gongyuan was personally trained by him and he is currently residing at Yongdu."

Xiao Yuetan supplemented: "This man is a master assassin. We cannot afford to be negligent."

Teng Yi wondered: "I thought Guan Zhongxie's Sect and Qixia Sword Sect are sworn enemies? Why would he collaborate with the disciple of Cao Qiudao?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "Of course there is Lao Ai's powerful henchman Han Jie who is linking and mediating between the two parties. This man is likely to be receiving bribes from Lu Buwei and has become Traitor Lu's spy within the camp of Lao Ai."

Ji Yanran probed: "Right now, what are Hubby's plans regarding Guan Zhongxie?"

Remembering Lu Niangrong, Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. In a deep voice, he declared: "Given the present circumstances, where it is kill or be killed, I have to chop him down with Hundred Battle Sabre before he has the chance to pick up his giant steel bow."

Xiao Yuetan quizzed: "When does Shaolong plan to strike?"

Xiang Shaolong seriously enquired: "Can we get our hands on two ordinary fishing boats? It must be secretly acquired."

Tao Fang answered: "Leave this to me. When does Shaolong want the boats?"

Xiang Shaolong avowed: "Tomorrow! The earlier the better! I want to cut off the head on his neck before he receives any updates and present it to Yingzheng as our farewell gift."

Everyone cheered in response and their morale was sky high.

CHAPTER 8

Surprise Attack

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

EARLY next morning, while disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun led fifty specially selected Wu Family Warriors in boarding the fishing vessels in a stealth manner. Against the current, they sailed towards Yongdu.

Because the Guardians have to escort Wu Guo, who is impersonating Xiang Shaolong and has to accompany Xiao Pan to Yongdu, they cannot participate in this mission.

Ji Yanran has to escort Qin Qing and cannot come along too.

Meanwhile, Teng Yi is responsible for leading the Imperial Cavalry in securing Xianyang and exterminating the other three teams of assassins.

With thick clouds covering the skies, it was drizzling non-stop.

Wearing their raincoats, the two men Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are sitting at the bow of the vessel and discussing the details of their assault.

Xiang Shaolong professed: "We only have one full day and one full night to carry out our plan. If we cannot kill Guan Zhongxie within this time frame, there will not be a second chance."

Brimming with conviction, Jing Jun suggested: "After sneaking into Yongdu, we will immediately place Guan Zhongxie's hiding place under strict surveillance. When it gets dark, we shall move in and take his life."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "However, I cannot decide if I should approach An Guxi for assistance. It may alert Lao Ai to our plans."

Jing Jun proposed: "Why don't we seek Fourth Brother's help instead!"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "I do not want Yingzheng to learn about this. Moreover, it will affect Fourth Brother's career development."

Jing Jun exclaimed: "In this case, let's depend on ourselves. With careful planning, we can simply vanish after the deed.

By then, Lao Ai would still be unaware that Guan Zhongxie is back and even perished in his territory of Yongdu.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Nonetheless, Han Jie would quickly realize that something is amiss. To make things worse, this is Han Jie’s territory. If we are planning to kill him as well, our risk will increase by several folds. That is why I am in a state of indecisiveness.”

Jing Jun belittled: “So what if he knows! Would he dare to tell Lao Ai about it? Furthermore, if he wishes to send word to Lu Buwei, it can only happen two days later. Even so, his messenger may be intercepted by Second Brother.”

According to their plans, when Xiao Pan leaves for Yongdu with his civil and military officials, Teng Yi’s Imperial Cavalry will set up blockades on the river route and travelling roads between Yongdu and Xianyang, carrying out checks on all the travellers going in and out of the city.

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “I guess that’s the best we can do.”

That same evening, Xiang Shaolong and his men discarded the two boats and climbed ashore about two miles away from Yongdu. Slipping past the river security checks, they approached Yongdu on foot.

Using falsified identification papers, they impersonated Qin citizens from other parts of the country. In different batches, they entered the City while posing as men from varying occupations.

Once they managed to contact the Wu Family Warriors whom Tao Fang had planted in Yongdu two years ago, Xiang Shaolong and his team concealed themselves in a common household near the south of the city. From there, they started their surveillance work.

Yongdu is Qin's first capital city in the Guan Zhong district. Situated at the merging point of River Wei and River Zhi, it is a melting pot for the cultures of Guan Zhong, Ba Shu and Si Gen.

The location of Yongdu is strategic, with roads leading to Long Nan, Han Zhong, Ba Shu and many others.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the Duke of Qin selected Yongdu as his capital precisely because of this factor. On top of fortifying the area of Guan Zhong, he can set the stage for world domination.

In the future, Yingzheng's success in uniting the lands of Hua Xia is due to Yongdu and Guan Zhong's strategic and critical location.

Although the capital of Qin has relocated to Xianyang, the ancestral temple of the royal family is still based in Yongdu. For all grand ceremonies, they must be held in Yongdu's ancestral temple.

As the last line of defense for Xianyang, Yongdu plays an irreplaceable role since the founding of the State.

Yongdu is home to several majestic palaces. Among them, Dazheng Palace and Qinian Palace are the most magnificent.

Presently, Dazheng Palace has become the residence of Zhu Ji while Qinian Palace is designated to be Xiao Pan's temporary residence for his coronation trip.

Arriving at Yongdu, Xiang Shaolong is able to have a first hand experience of Lao Ai's grandeur.

The soldiers of Yongdu are dressed in military uniforms with a golden band around their collar, portraying an air of extravagance. Besides dressing differently from the usual simple-looking Qin soldier, the Yongdu guards are behaving in a brazen, condescending manner.

An Guxi's garrison has obviously failed to gain control over the entire city. For the time being, only the South Gate near River Wei, the road leading to Qinian Palace and Qinian Palace itself is under his jurisdiction.

With Zhu Ji backing Lao Ai and before their open confrontation, even Xiao Pan is powerless against this 'fake father'.

Of course the situation will be totally reversed when the indomitable and master general Wang Jian enters the City. Regardless of their self-glorifying titles, Lao Ai's thirty thousand rebels will be like cows being sent to the abattoir.

The only viable threat is Guan Zhongxie's secret assassination team.

And Xiang Shaolong's current mission is to move one step ahead of them, uprooting and annihilating them before they could carry out their plot.

Furthermore, he has to complete his mission without alerting Lao Ai. Otherwise, he would be collateral damage.

It is nearly 7pm and the sky is still drizzling when a report came in: Disguised as a commoner, a lone Guan Zhongxie has just left his hiding place.

Guan Zhongxie and Xiang Shaolong share a common drawback. Irrespective of their disguise, the observant would be able to identify them from their aura.

Xiang Shaolong decisively gave the order to begin their mission.

With Jing Jun and the fifty warriors, Xiang Shaolong disembarked at a quiet and lonely alley near the selected residence before removing their outer coats that is concealing their equipment and night suits.

The fifty warriors swiftly divided themselves into ten teams of five. Borrowing the cover of the walls and nightly shower, they snuck into the residence. The activities of the residence are limited to the occasional strongman travelling along the corridor. None of the faces are familiar to Xiang Shaolong or Jing Jun.

This particular residence is divided into five parts. In the centre, there is a sky well and sheltered walkways provide the link between them.

Once everyone is in battle position, Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and two teams of warriors cloaked themselves among the flower bushes beside the main hall.

The illumination of lanterns and human voices are transpiring from inside.

A warrior crept to the window and stole a peep before tiptoeing back and reporting: "There are five men inside the hall and two of them are armed. They are clustered on a mat at the east side of the hall, sitting rather close to the window."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "Are there any womenfolk?"

Another warrior who had peeped into the hall replied: "I noticed two female maids."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly troubled. Originally, he had wanted to kill every living soul within this dwelling. In this kill or be killed scenario, there is no room for compassion.

But how could he bear to kill these defenseless women?

He sighed with a breath: "Kill all the men. Capture all the women. We will deal with them afterwards. Tell everybody to wait for my signal."

Four of the warriors left to execute his command.

Within a minute, Xiang Shaolong's instructions have been communicated to everyone. They will act once they hear Jing Jun's pre-arranged three continuous birdcalls.

On the first wave of birdcalls, Jing Jun and the warriors rapidly dived out from the flower bushes and stationed themselves at their allocated window or door.

The birdcalls are broadcast again.

Sounds of door breaking and windows shattering reverberated throughout the residence.

For the main hall, Jing Jun was the first to break through a window. Before he even landed on the ground, he unleashed a flurry of arrows around him, heralding the start of a close combat sequence.

An arrow pierced the throat of a man near the window and he collapsed at once. As the other men scrambled to their feet in horror, they were simultaneously hit by at least three arrows, tragically dying on the spot. It is not known if Bian Dongshan is one of them.

From the rear courtyards, dreadful shrieks were heard but they are quickly replaced by silence.

Minutes later, ten warriors escorted a lady who is carrying her baby son in her arms and four female maids who are shocked out of their wits to Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun who are standing in the centre of the hall.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun exchanged a look. The lady turned out to be Lu Family's Third Mistress Lu Niangrong.

Although there is no trace of blood on Lu Niangrong's face, her eyes are brimming with determination and blazing with extreme hatred. In her arms, the child is peacefully playing with his own collar, completely oblivious to the oncoming catastrophe.

Clenching her teeth, she viciously swore: "Go ahead and kill us! Dad will definitely avenge us."

Never in his wildest dream did Xiang Shaolong anticipate the presence of Lu Nianrong. Momentarily, he was stunned into silence. After all, he is still feeling apologetic towards Lu Nianrong and would not extent his hatred for Lu Buwei onto his daughter.

Jing Jun icily smirked: "Revenge! Humph! Your father can barely fend for himself, how can he hope to protect you? If you are feeling unjustified, you can only blame it on yourself for being his flesh and blood."

Lu Nianrong furiously challenged: "Shut up! Who gave you the right to speak to me like that?"

Xiang Shaolong extended his hand just in time to prevent Jing Jun from slapping Lu Nianrong. Softening his tone, he examined: "What brings Third Mistress here?"

Lu Nianrong coldly grinned: "My affairs are none of your concern."

The Wu Family Special Forces members instantly flared up and grunted menacing. Once Xiang Shaolong gave the green light, they would hack her to pieces. Simultaneously, the eight legs of the four maids turned into jelly and with a series of 'ku dong' sounds, the maids collapse onto the floor and one of them was so shocked she fainted on the spot. The baby started to cry with a high pitch.

Signaling his men to hold their ground, Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Putting aside all other matters, isn't Third Mistress worried about the infant in your arms?"

Lowering her head to pacify her treasured baby, Lu Nianrong's face is streaming with hot tears. In a pitiful tone, she grieved: "If Zhongxie is dead, life has no more meaning for us, mother and son."

At this juncture, someone reported: "Target is reaching the residence soon!"

Lu Nianrong resolutely raised her head and faced Xiang Shaolong, her pretty eyes radiating with a pleading expression. In fact, Xiang Shaolong's anguish is not inferior to hers. He had promised Xiao Pan that he will present Guan Zhongxie's head to him at the coronation ceremony. Now that he is facing Lu Nianrong mother and son, he cannot harden his heart.

Xiang Shaolong has promised Xiao Pan that he will present Guan Zhongxie's head to him at the coronation ceremony. Now that he is facing Lu Nianrong mother and son, he cannot harden his heart.

He does not have the luxury of time to slowly contemplate the situation. Xiang Shaolong ordered: "Miss Lu, please take a seat."

To Lu Nianrong, he added: "Should Third Mistress try to shout a warning, Brother Guan will certainly die tonight. Aye! Do you trust me, Xiang Shaolong?"

Hearing his words, Lu Nianrong was taken aback while Jing Jun frowned with disapproval. Struggling to say something, he eventually kept quiet.

Under the light drizzle and night breeze, an unprepared Guan Zhongxie stepped over the ledge into the courtyard. By the time he realizes something is amiss, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun had mugged him from the left and right, overpowering him in an instance.

Recognizing his prowess, the warriors disarmed him. When they are about to bind his hands, Xiang Shaolong motioned them to stop. He enquired: "Why didn't Brother Guan inform Little Brother that you are back."

From his voice, Guan Zhongxie realized that he is Xiang Shaolong. He demanded in a deep voice: "Where is Nianrong?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "Sister in law and your son are safe and sound. Let's talk inside!"

Noting the capture of Guan Zhongxie, Lu Nianrong instantly broke down and wept incessantly.

Glancing bitterly once at the mother and son, an exasperated Guan Zhongxie sat down at a faraway corner as indicated by Xiang Shaolong. Crestfallen, he surrendered: "Although I, Guan Zhongxie, is unwilling to admit defeat, I must say that I am certainly not your, Xiang Shaolong's, match."

Subsequently, he lowered his head and pleaded: "Can you let them off? I only ask for an honorable death."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling touched. For the first time, he can feel this formidable nemesis treating Lu Nianrong mother and son with true love, explaining his subservient and begging tone.

Furthermore, this is definitely not an appropriate time but still, Lu Nianrong risked her life to meet up with Guan Zhongxie, clearly demonstrating their loving relationship.

As Xiang Shaolong pondered, Jing Jun interrupted: "Third Brother! I wish to have a word with you."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "Let's talk later! I understand your concern."

Turning to the vulnerable Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong grilled: "Brother Guan should recognize the fact that your Father in law's days are numbered and Lao Ai cannot amount to much. Brother Guan, what are your plans?"

Guan Zhongxie shuddered once. Lifting his head to face Xiang Shaolong, his eyes glowed with utter disbelief.

Jing Jun panicked: "How are we going to answer to Crown Prince?"

Regaining his composure, Xiang Shaolong plainly decided: "I know what to do. Brother Guan, you have yet to tell me about your plans?"

Guan Zhongxie exhaled once: "Brother Xiang is not afraid that I may send word to Imperial Uncle or Lao Ai?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "That is why I must get Brother Guan to promise me that you will not do so. Anyway, I will escort Sister in law and Brother Guan separately from Yongdu. Both of you shall sail to Chu. By then, even if Brother Guan wishes to send word, it would be too late. Without anyone working with you, Brother Guan is like a single hand that cannot clap; all your efforts will be futile."

Looking once at his wife and son at another corner, Guan Zhongxie's eyes started to shimmer with unbounded tenderness. Shifting his gaze back to Xiang Shaolong, he stretched out his giant hand.

Xiang Shaolong reached out and gripped his hand firmly. In a sincere tone, he wished: "Brother Guan, bon voyage."

His two eyes turning slightly red, Guan Zhongxie lightly thanked: "Even though we have always been enemies, Brother Xiang is the man I, Guan Zhongxie, admire most. Thank you!"

That night, the residence where Guan Zhongxie is hiding erupted into a sea of inferno. After the fire has been put out, more than thirty male corpses were unearthed. To Lao Ai and his men, it is a complete mystery.

Only Han Jie knows the truth. Scared out of his wits, he deserted Lao Ai and fled Yongdu. Since then, there is no news of him.

Early next morning, accompanied by Jing Jun, Xiang Shaolong who is disguised as Wu Guo finally contacted An Guxi. Together, they await the arrival of Qin's Crown Prince, who is currently travelling along the Yellow River and will subsequently be coronated three days later.

CHAPTER 9

The Cruel Truth

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

COMPRISING of more than a hundred large, three-mast ships, the colossus Imperial Fleet is sailing commandingly against the current towards the southern harbour of Yongdu.

Ahead of the fleet, two battleships unloaded a hundred Palace Guards which rapidly assembled to form a protection squad, exhibiting a fearsome and serious ambience.

Leading the officials of Yongdu, Lao Ai formed a welcoming party at the harbour.

Disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun remained at the side of An Guxi, viewing the enormous fleet from a distance.

Jing Jun leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "Take a closer look at Lao Ai; I am certain he did not sleep well last night."

Not knowing that Han Jie had flown the coop, of course Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are puzzled over Lao Ai's lethargic appearance.

The royal ship of Xiao Pan rumbled as it begins to approach the shore.

Jing Jun was restless: "If that fellow Wu Guo failed in his impersonation and is escorted down the ship with ropes tied around him, what should we do?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "The only way is for me to confess to Yingzheng that we are trying to confuse the enemy. Nonetheless, our scheme will fall apart."

At this juncture, An Guxi turned to Jing Jun and cheered: "It has been a long time since I laid my eyes on Third Brother. In my heart, I have been pining for him. Come!"

Patting his horse, he rode forward.

The two men hurriedly followed him.

As the gangplank slide down the side of the ship, from the shore, Lao Ai ordered the musicians to play a welcoming song.

First off the ship are three hundred Palace Guards who formed a three layer human wall on the left and right while maintaining a ten feet gap in the centre. Their well-synchronized movements are neat and pleasing to the eye.

An Guxi and the others jumped off their horses and kneeled at the side of the horse.

Taking large strides, Lord Changwen took the lead in coming down the gangplank. Behind him are twenty elite palace guards who are responsible for clearing the travelling path of obstructions. The first two palace guards are bearing the royal flag and clan flag respectively.

Hot on their heels are ten palace attendants bearing gifts and prayer accessories. Behind them are another twenty palace guards before the appearance of the future Qin Shihuang Xiao Pan and his Crown Princess. Surrounding Xiao Pan and his wife are various important officials such as Lord Changping, Wang Guan, Li Si, Cai Zhe, Qin Qing with a head veil and of course, Wu Guo who is disguised as Xiang Shaolong. Together, they alighted from the ship.

Beyond the barrage of Palace Guards, tens of thousands of Yongdu dwellers instantly exploded into earth-shattering cheers and calls of 'Your Majesty'. Kneeling down to pay their respects to Xian Pan, it was a highly robust scene.

Seeing that Wu Guo is 'unmolested', Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun heaved a sigh of relief.

Xiang Shaolong stole a glance at Lao Ai who is a distance away from him and noticed his face darkening at the

welcoming cheers of the crowd. He inwardly sighed: You are just a gigolo who managed to obtain your current official position through nepotism. In terms of military might, popularity vote and image, you are simply no match for Qin Shihuang.

With an expressionless face, Xiao Pan acknowledged Lao Ai's congratulations. With Crown Princess, he boarded the royal carriage. Under the protection of Lord Changwen's Palace Guards, the carriage drove towards the city gates while An Guxi and his forces provided additional security along the road, guaranteeing a flawless journey. Seizing an opportunity, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun boarded Wu Guo's carriage. Both Xiang Shaolong and Wu Guo swiftly removed their masks and clothes before switching their attires.

Wu Guo proudly proclaimed: "Fortunately, I am good at malingering; otherwise, it is really hard to handle all the socialization."

Xiang Shaolong probed: "Did Crown Prince approach you?"

Wu Guo answered: "He merely sent the Imperial Physicians to check on me. He did mention that after landing in Yongdu, he requires that I accompany him to Dazheng Palace to pay his respects to Empress."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "What?"

At this moment, An Guxi finally found the time to ride to their carriage. Xiang Shaolong hastily sat on Wu Guo's earlier seat and smiled: "Greetings to General."

An Guxi appears to be ignorant about the friction between him and Xiao Pan. He chuckled: “Shaolong can simply address me as Guxi like before! Shaolong is truly remarkable and is a pillar of our Great Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong engaged An Guxi in an uninteresting conversation. When the convoy is entering the city, An Guxi excused himself and speedily attended to his affairs.

Leaning on the back of his chair, Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief.

The first part of his plan has reached a successful conclusion. The remaining plan is to try and survive Xiao Pan’s hidden attack and flee back to Xianyang.

With Crown Princess and a large group of officials, Xiao Pan disembarked from his carriage in front of Dazheng Palace’s main hall.

Noting that Xiao Pan is accompanied by numerous officials, Xiang Shaolong began to relax. He secretly thought: It would be disastrous if Xiao Pan and himself were the only ones who are meeting Zhu Ji.

After Ji Yanran’s reminder, he excruciatingly forced himself to face the stark reality: Zhu Ji is beyond redemption and it is impossible for her to forsake Lao Ai and leave with him.

Is there a way to protect her from the impending massacre?

There is some hope.

But after losing Lao Ai and her sons, and realizing that Xiao Pan is not her own flesh and blood, what is the point of living? She would be passing her days like a lifeless zombie.

At this interval, Mao Jiao came out of the hall. After kneeling down to pay his respects, he announced: "Today, Empress is not feeling well and does not wish to face a large crowd. She specifically asks for Crown Prince and Great General only."

Everyone was taken aback.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances. Both of them were having the same thought: If there were soldiers ambushing them from within the hall, wouldn't the two of them end up as mincemeat?

Lord Changwen insisted: "General (I) has to escort Crown Prince at all times."

Standing beside them, Lao Ai cheekily remarked: "Empress is merely against a huge number of visitors. Of course the Head of the Palace Guards must accompany Crown Prince!"

Xiao Pan suddenly declared: "It's all right! To enter the palace and pay my respects, Guaren only requires Great General's company."

Noting Mao Jiao secretly signaling Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended Xiao Pan's abrupt display of bravery.

Gesturing at Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan boldly ascended the stairs to the hall. Xiang Shaolong hastily chased up to him.

Without turning his head back, Xiao Pan whispered: "In your opinion, what is that lady thinking of?"

Xiang Shaolong whispered in reply: "She probably wants to clarify matters and from our meeting, she will decide whether she wants to support Lao Ai whole-heartedly or otherwise."

Without the least hint of surprise, Xiao Pan coldly hissed: "This is called: Making one mistake after another."

Xiang Shaolong wanted to make a last ditch attempt to remind Xiao Pan to keep his promise. But he is also fully aware that his effort would be in vain. Therefore, he suppressed the urge to talk about it.

Perched high up on her Empress throne, Zhu Ji is alone in the hall. As their boots stepped on the floor of the massive hall, the sound of footsteps somewhat produces a chilling sensation.

The empty and spacious hall is cold, lifeless and uninviting

Although Zhu Ji is slightly chubbier, she is still as attractive as ever and there weren't any signs of aging. The only distinguishable factor is some haggardness in her features. Frostily eyeing the two men bowing to her, Zhu Ji plainly state: "Royal Son, Great General, please have a seat."

Both men sat down on the first two seats to her right. Xiao Pan simply followed the palace protocol and commented: "Witnessing Empress Mother radiating with even more brilliance than the past, Royal Son is filled with joy."

Zhu Ji sighed with a breath: "How long has it been since I laid my eyes on Royal Son? I believe it is at least three or four years! Sometimes, I felt as if I never gave birth to a son like you."

His eyes flashing once with a killing aura, Xiao Pan quickly faked an air of reverence: "Empress Mother is mistaken. Royal Son is fully occupied with matters of the State and on top of that, I do not wish to disturb Empress Mother's recuperation. Royal Son still loves and care for Empress Mother just like before."

Xiang Shaolong stared blankly at the space in front of him. In his heart, he wished he was dreaming, for the truth is simply too unbearable.

Remembering the earlier days in Handan when Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan are loving each other to bits, they have come to a stage when both parties are lying through their teeth and mutually scheming against each other.

Her gaze landing on Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji's voice became gentle as she acknowledged: "I have yet to congratulate Great General on your triumphant return!"

Staring intensely at her, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart being overwhelmed by immense and genuine sensations of guilt and affections. He sighed: "It was due to luck that I managed to preserve my life! It is not worthy of Empress's commendation."

Her delicate eyes turning chilly, Zhu Ji interrogated: "Recently, the rumours surrounding the heritage of Crown

Prince is spreading like wildfire. What counter strategies do Great General propose? I hope you can say something to calm my nerves.”

Xiao Pan icily interrupted: “Royal Son has issued a State-wide decree, prohibiting anyone from discussing this matter. I hope Empress can understand my position and put your doubts to rest.”

Zhu Ji blew her top: “As your natural mother, am I barred from discussing it too?”

Xiao Pan replied with indifference: “Royal Son dare not. However, Great General is not permitted to violate the decree.”

Zhu Ji started laughing in an unnatural way. She pitifully observed: “It nearly slipped my mind. Three days later, Royal Son will be officially crowned; naturally, you cannot be bothered with me, Empress.”

Xiao Pan plainly state: “Empress Mother is mistaken about Royal Son. At the end of the day, the slanders that Empress Mother heard are deliberately cooked up by evil villains who wishes to disrupt the relationship between us, mother and son.”

Subsequently, he stood up and declared: “Empress Mother’s health is far from ideal; it is not good for you to get agitated. Royal Son is taking my leave. At a later date, I shall pay my respects to Empress Mother again!”

Up till now, Xiang Shaolong did not have a chance to speak out.

He could only sighed to himself. Even if Xiao Pan did not have the intention to kill her, based on Zhu Ji's words, she has basically sentenced herself to death.

To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong is incapable of saving her.

This is because Zhu Ji no longer treats him with goodwill. The goodwill has been replaced by the bitterest hatred of all.

She has already jumped to the conclusion that Xiang Shaolong had deceived her, and may even assume that Xiang Shaolong has killed her real son.

Given these circumstances, what can he do?

Qinian Palace.

In the Imperial Study, Xiao Pan received the giant steel bow of Guan Zhongxie that Xiang Shaolong had presented to him. He burst out laughing: "Official Guan, if you did not end up as a muddle-headed ghost, you should have realized that you made the worst mistake of your life by choosing to collaborate with Lu Buwei years ago."

Standing on Xiao Pan's left and right are Li Si, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen, An Guxi, Wang Guan and several other officials. One by one, they congratulated Xiang Shaolong for drawing first blood.

As if a huge burden is lifted off his shoulders, Xiao Pan placed the steel bow on his table and motioned for the

officials to take a seat. With a thrilled smile, he faced Xiang Shaolong and commended: "It is a pity we are unable to secure Zhongxie's head, nonetheless, Guaren fully agrees with Official Jing's actions: By destroying the bodies and other physical evidence, we would not alert the rebels to our presence."

Pausing, he added: "Over the next few days, we must be very careful with our food and drink. Or else, we may fall prey to Lao Ai's venomous hands."

Lord Changping cheerfully replied: "Crown Prince can put your mind at ease. Officials (We) will be extra cautious."

Scanning the faces of everyone in the study, Xiao Pan's gaze eventually landed on Xiang Shaolong. In a gentle voice, he inquired: "Is Great General feeling better?"

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "While fleeing for my life at the borders of Han and Wei, I have overexerted my body. Back then, I can force myself to endure the agony. Unexpectedly, after my return, I suffered countless relapses. The amount of medication I am taking is enough to strike fear into my heart. "

Xiao Pan appreciated: "In this case, over the next few days, Great General must have a good rest and refrain from participating in strenuous activities!"

Subsequently, his royal eyes turned frosty as he icily rumbled: "It has been ascertained that Lao Ai and his gang will begin their rebellion during the royal dinner banquet,

which is taking place the same day after the coronation ceremony. Does Great General have any bright ideas?"

Xiang Shaolong simply remarked: "He who moves first gain the initiative; he who moves later loses the initiative. Such is the timeless truth."

Slamming his palm on the long table in front of his dragon throne, Xiao Pan sighed: "With this proverb alone, our victory is assured."

Wang Guan frowned: "Pardon subordinate's incomprehension but didn't we decide earlier to wait for the rebels to make their move first before charging them with the act and consequently launching our counterattack?"

Xiao Pan compellingly chuckled: "Earlier decisions are based on earlier circumstances; Present decisions are based on present circumstances. Regardless of the methods employed, victory is our top priority. We shall make our move before the royal banquet and catch him with his pants down."

Li Si commented: "The atrocious traitor Lao Ai will probably die without even realizing what is the cause of his downfall."

Of course Li Si is referring to Mao Jiao the super spy. Because of his meticulous efforts, Xiao Pan is fully conscious of Lao Ai's manpower, preparations and rebellion timing, allowing him to plan his moves accordingly.

Appearing to be brimming with confidence, Xiao Pan nonchalantly articulated: "Two hours before the royal

banquet, Senior General An shall take my decree and seize military control of the city. All the entrances and exits must be secured and no one is allowed to leave. This would surely provoke Lao Ai into commencing his rebellion at an earlier timing. Concurrently, the Palace Guards shall seal off Qinian Palace. On one hand, they can safeguard our officials. On the other hand, they can arrest enemy spies within our cohort according to the name list.”

Pausing, he added: “Simultaneously, Great General Wang and his massive army shall enter the city and decimate every single insurgent while Great General Xiang and Guaren shall move in and attack Dazheng Palace. Hng! Guaren is interested to know what will be Lao Ai’s final consequence.

Everyone expressed praises and approval.

Only Xiang Shaolong can recognize the inkling in his words; if he does not come up with a good solution, Dazheng Palace shall be his final resting place.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his designated courtyard at the rear of Qinian Palace. His immediate neighbour Qin Qing and Ji Yanran who is in the guise of a maid have sneaked in and are chatting with the two men Jing Jun and Wu Guo.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong, the two ladies are especially delighted.

Sitting down, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Did you manage to contact Fourth Brother?”

Jing Jun nodded: "While Third Brother is off to Dazheng Palace, I used the opportunity to meet up with him."

Ji Yanran probed: "What did Zhu Ji say?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "The situation is dreadful. Her relationship with Crown Prince is irreparable."

After answering, he turned to Jing Jun and enquired: "What did Fourth Brother say?"

Jing Jun reported: "Fourth Brother mentioned that Crown Prince has ordered him to barricade Yongdu with immediate effect. Unless they have a special travel pass, no one is allowed to leave or enter."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Crown Prince is lying to me again. Minutes ago, he mentioned that the barricade will only be set up after the coronation and before the royal banquet."

Qin Qing was terrified: "What should we do?"

After contemplating, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "It would be easy for me to leave. I can officially propose to Crown Prince that I am sending some men back to Xianyang to increase the fighting prowess of Second Brother. Disguised as Wu Guo, I can simply walk out of Yongdu unchallenged. It is not difficult for Wu Guo too. By resuming his original appearance and with Fourth Brother assisting him, his getaway is assured. My main issue is Sister Qing. In the name of security, Yingzheng would definitely send men to keep you under strict surveillance. What can we do to counter this?"

Ji Yanran wondered: “Has Hubby decided on your departure schedule?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “By right, Jing Jun and I should leave for Xianyang tomorrow. Aye! But how can I leave the two of you behind? Crown Prince knows me too well.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Then let’s leave together!”

Everyone stared at this gorgeous Talented Lady with amazement.

Qin Qing cheered: “Yanran, stop beating around the bush. What brilliant strategy did you come up with?”

Ji Yanran elatedly narrated: “I was inspired by Hubby’s earlier words; we shall exploit the ambiguous relationship between Empress and Crown Prince. Think about it, if Empress asks for our Grand Tutor Qin to keep her company in Dazheng Palace, how would Crown Prince react?”

Everyone was full of praises for her ingenuity.

Qin Qing joyfully proclaimed: “In this aspect, I can apply some trickery and make it impossible for Crown Prince to reject.”

Everyone knows that Qin Qing is extremely familiar with the intricacies of the palace’s affairs. To her, it’ll be a piece of cake.

Ji Yanran added: “Additionally, this tactic would give Crown Prince the false impression that Hubby no longer wishes to flee. Unknown to him, before our Grand Tutor Qin arrives at

Dazheng Palace, she would have vanished en route.” Wu Guo asked: “And when should I, this imposter Great General, start to make my getaway?”

Xiang Shaolong cautioned: “Basically, you have to react to the ever-changing conditions. Notwithstanding, preserving your life is of utmost importance. You must remember to leave before the beginning of the coronation. Or else, by then, Yingzheng would not let you out of his sight.”

Ji Yanran suggested: “You should probably leave on the night before the coronation! With a two days window, we should be able to take down Lu Buwei.”

Jing Jun reminded: “Do not loiter around Xianyang; get back to the farms as soon as possible. After we have reassembled, we can then make our final escape according to our plans. That would be our grand finale.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “After years of hardship, it is time for Heaven to grant me days of leisure and a mind free from worries!”

The eyes of everybody were lost in a series of flashbacks. In their ears, they could somewhat hear the hoof beats of a vibrant horse galloping freely across the green prairie of the borderlands.

CHAPTER 10
The Takeover of Xianyang
[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THAT very night, Xiang Shaolong sought an audience with Xiao Pan, indicating his desire to send Jing Jun and his troops back to Xianyang in order to reinforce Teng Yi against Lu Buwei.

Without any grounds to deny his request, Xiao Pan agreed on the spot, giving Xiang Shaolong the opportunity to openly and fearlessly make preparations for shipping and logistics.

Early next morning, Qin Qing paid Xiao Pan a visit too, professing that she has received Empress's invitation to stay in Dazheng Palace for a few days.

Not suspecting anything and coupled with Qin Qing's insistence, Xiao Pan gave his permission.

Disguised as Wu Family Warriors, Qin Qing and Ji Yanran were escorted by another eight authentic Wu Family Warriors. Together, they unabashedly strode out of Qinian Palace. Along the way, they rendezvoused with Xiang Shaolong and they jointly concealed themselves among the entourage of Jing Jun. After hiding their carriage in an inconspicuous location, they immediately left the city and boarded their ship. Sailing along the current and aided by a favourable wind, they arrived at Xianyang in half a day's time. Landing at the predetermined shore, they waited for an hour before Teng Yi, Tao Fang and Xiao Yuetan came to pick them up. Noticing the presence of Qin Qing and Ji Yanran, the welcoming trio is exceptionally thrilled and their morale is boosted to a higher echelon.

Teng Yi chuckled: "Everything is prepared and we are simply waiting for Great General's leadership and instructions."

Xiang Shaolong laughingly threw a punch at Teng Yi's beefy shoulder, declaring: "Even Second Brother is making fun of me; I'm sure you are feeling really happy. Presently, we only have a two-day window. Thus, we must act at once."

Ji Yanran questioned Xiao Yuetan: "Any news from Manager Tu?"

Xiao Yuetan answered: "Master Tu, his family and his three hundred loyal brethren are prepared and in position. Once we give the word, they'll drug the water."

Teng Yi advised: "It is critical to time our attacks well. As Manager Tu is doping the wells, we have to simultaneously seize control of Xu Shang's Imperial Infantry. This is to ensure a safe passage for Manager Tu's family and followers. In addition, it will prevent Old Traitor Lu from eluding our capture."

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "This is precisely the limitation of the anesthetic. Due to its strength, the drug will take effect almost immediately. The only way to maximize its effect is to apply the drug at dinnertime. Nonetheless, it is difficult to tell how many would fall prey to it."

Jing Jun proposed: "If we secretly besiege Imperial Uncle Residence, Lu Buwei will surely fall into our clutches."

Xiang Shaolong checked: "Is Manager Tu aware of the secret tunnels of Imperial Uncle Residence?"

Xiao Yuetan explained: "During the construction of Imperial Uncle Residence, Master Tu is undergoing the lowest point in his career. Merely responsible for purchasing building materials, he does not possess the slightest knowledge about this aspect."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "In this case, we have to deploy some signaling outposts outside the city. Aye! Unless we have Crown Prince's royal decree, we are unable to prevent him from leaving the city. Furthermore, it would arouse the

suspicious of our Imperial Cavalry lieutenants. As a result, it is better for us to pursue him with our own forces.”

Turning to Qin Qing, Xiang Shaolong instructed: “Sister Qing can now proceed to your residence under the escort of Master Tao. After selecting your followers, the rest of your staff should be fittingly dismissed. Upon completion, you should head to the farms at once and await patiently for our good news.”

Affected by the calm before the storm, Qin Qing bit her lower lip and nodded once.

As Xiang Shaolong’s heart is flooded with tenderness, Ji Yanran questioned Teng Yi: “Recently, did you uncover any traces of the adversaries?”

When she mentioned ‘adversaries’, everyone knew that Ji Yanran is referring to Wei Liao and his army of forty thousand soldiers. All the eyes are now centered at Teng Yi.

With a bewildered expression, Teng Yi remarked: “I am equally baffled as there is no indication of their existence.”

Xiao Yuetan made a guess: “Presently, we are in a race against time. In my opinion, Wei Liao and his forces should be camping further upriver. Once he receives Yingzheng’s decree, he can easily sail to Xianyang within a short span of time. If we move fast enough, we can depart Xianyang long before the arrival of Wei Liao.”

Not giving a hoot, Xiang Shaolong excitedly hailed: “It’s showtime.”

Everybody enthusiastically affirmed his words.

Still disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong entered the city and headed to the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre. Resuming his original appearance, he simultaneously summoned the lieutenants of Imperial Cavalry and Palace Guards who had stayed behind to fortify Xianyang. Displaying his Tiger Seal, he proclaimed that he is acting on the orders of Crown Prince to return to Xianyang in order to regain control of the three armies of Xianyang and guard against any potential uprising.

Of course the lieutenants are aware of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's working partnership. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong has always been Crown Prince's confidante and his personal standing is unmatched. Coupled with the appearance of the Tiger Seal, they are fully convinced and pledged their willingness to fulfill their duties even at the cost of their lives.

Once he completed his deployments, Xiang Shaolong and his companions raced towards the Imperial Infantry Command Centre.

At this time, the lanterns are in the process of being lighted. Within the city, the ambience is tranquil and there is nothing out of the ordinary.

First of all, Xiang Shaolong ordered the Palace Guards and Imperial Cavalry to barricade the Command Centre before personally barging in with Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Ji Yanran, Xiao Yuetan and his other compatriots.

Before the sentries could sound the alarm, they are overwhelmed by Xiang Shaolong and his men.

At this juncture, Xu Shang was having a discussion with his lieutenants in the main hall. Caught unprepared by Xiang Shaolong's gatecrashing, he did not even have the chance to react when his life is already threatened by more than ten crossbows.

The countenance of Xu Shang and his lieutenants changed at once.

This Shangcai number one swordsman did not even have the opportunity to pull his personal sword out of his waist sheathe as this invasion is simply unforeseeable. Especially when Xiang Shaolong should logically be at Yongdu.

Maintaining his coolness, Xu Shang demanded in a deep voice: "Great General, what do you mean by this?"

After his men have disarmed Xu Shang and his lieutenants, Xiang Shaolong displayed the Tiger Seal and broadcasted: "General (I) is acting on Crown Prince's orders. From this second onwards, the Imperial Infantry shall fall under my jurisdiction. Who dares to disobey?"

Witnessing the Tiger Seal, Xu Shang realizes that he is stripped of his military authority and is now a powerless commoner like before. The lieutenants stared at Xiang Shaolong with a dumbfounded expression.

Noting that he has the situation under control, Xiang Shaolong directed: "Except for Commander Xu, escort the

others to prison.” When Xu Shang is alone, Xiang Shaolong took the main seat and ordered Xu Shang to sit down at a side. After retrieving Xu Shang’s Imperial Infantry Seal, Teng Yi and Jing Jun left the hall to begin their takeover of the Imperial Infantry. Xu Shang bitterly smiled: “You have won!”

His words carrying a double meaning, Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “This is predetermined fate. I, Xiang Shaolong, am just acting my part! Ever since Lu Buwei poisoned and murdered the late king, that traitor is destined to suffer a terrifying demise. The problem is; is Brother Xu concerned about your personal consequence?”

His eyes flashing with hope, Xu Shang wondered in a deep voice: “Will Great General be willing to let me off?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “Brother Xu should know that I am not a ruthless killing machine. Even Guan Zhongxie and Third Mistress have been spared by me. Right now, they should have arrived in Chu. Brother Xu, what future would you choose for yourself?”

Learning that Guan Zhongxie has failed and has fled for his life after being released by Xiang Shaolong, Xu Shang broke down. He sighed: “Great General is truly peerless. What do you want from me?”

Xiang Shaolong negotiated: “Once Brother Xu reveals Lu Buwei’s emergency escape route, I will immediately escort Brother Xu and your family out of the city.”

Whilst Xu Shang is contemplating and hesitating, Xiang Shaolong prompted: “If Brother Xu still wishes to hear Lan

Gongyuan's angelic voice, you must come to a quick decision."

Ji Yanran gently reminded: "Even if Lu Buwei manages to flee from Xianyang, certain death awaits him. Brother Xu had better not let this opportunity slip by."

Xiao Yuetan plainly announced: "I am Xiao Yuetan; Brother Xu should have heard of me!"

Xu Shang stared at Xiao Yuetan with amazement: "Didn't you die a long time ago?"

Xiao Yuetan viciously snarled: "If I did not fake my death; do you think Lu Buwei will allow me to live till today? Do you really believe that Lu Buwei appreciates you and your talent? As a subordinate of Lu Buwei, you are nothing but a pawn that he can kill or abandon at will, do you understand?"

Xu Shang finally conceded. He disclosed: "Inside the bedroom of Imperial Uncle, there is a secret passageway that leads to a huge mansion along Bai Tong Street, near the south of the city. That's all I know."

Xiang Shaolong eagerly stood up. After waiting for nearly ten excruciatingly years, the time is finally ripe to take the life of his arch nemesis Lu Buwei.

As Xiang Shaolong and his men lay siege to the passageway exit, every single one of them is feeling perplexed.

Four hours ago, when Tu Xian led Jing Jun, Teng Yi and their troops into Imperial Uncle Residence, they discovered comatose individuals strewn all over the property. However,

they are unable to locate Lu Buwei. He has evidently made his escape through the secret tunnel.

Furthermore, there are no reports of Lu Buwei leaving the city; could he be hiding in Xianyang?

That does not make sense.

Jing Jun proposed: "Let's conduct a complete sweep of the city. We'll definitely trace him."

Tu Xian advocated: "Why don't we search this empty residence first? If my presumption is correct, there must be another secret passageway from this residence to another property or warehouse near the city wall. From there, a final tunnel will lead to an exit outside the city."

Teng Yi immediately gestured to his troops and they rapidly began searching.

Ji Yanran sighed: "If this is true, we have lost the game by merely one move. Unfortunately, our signal outposts are only paying attention to the travellers leaving Xianyang City."

Xiao Yuetan suggested: "Traitor Lu cannot bear to part with his treasures and valuables. Additionally, travelling through tunnels is much slower than travelling on roads. Why don't we take a gamble? Let's assume he has left the tunnels and is travelling by foot towards the borders. I am making this conjecture because Xianyang's river routes are under our control."

Xiang Shaolong decisively ordered: "Cease the search. Let's leave the city at once." Xiang Shaolong, his companions and two hundred over Wu Family Special Forces members rode swiftly out of the city and in the direction of Zhao. In the blink of an eye, they discovered footprints about one mile away from Xianyang City. Some of the footprints are very deep, indicating a heavy load on its owner.

Xiang Shaolong and his followers are ecstatic.

Jing Jun frowned instead: "Judging by the footprints, there are more than two thousand of them. Their strength is way above ours."

Teng Yi scoffed: "For someone on the run, he is surely lacking in courage. In addition, part of their group is made up of women and children. There is nothing worth fearing."

In a serious demeanour, Xiang Shaolong indicated: "Within the family warriors of Lu Clan, there is no shortage of experts. If we were to catch up to their tail, they may learn about our strength and engage us in a fight to the death. Although we may not lose, death and injury cannot be avoided. It is not a feasible plan."

Ji Yanran recommended: "If we can somehow estimate Lu Buwei's flight path, we can take advantage of our horses and speed to overtake them. From there, we can ambush him and confront him head on. As this technique will not betray our strength, the odds are more favourable."

Tu Xian is best acquainted with Lu Buwei's affairs. He deduced: "Judging from the direction of the footprints, they

should be fleeing towards Wu Chang City, a developed City that is situated downriver from Xianyang. The city mayor is Lu Buwei's trusted confidante. From there, they can board a ship and sail towards the east. Otherwise, with their mere feet, how far can they run?"

Teng Yi enthusiastically cheered: "En route to Wu Chang is a valley named Windstorm Valley. To reach Wu Chang, they must travel through it. With our horses and including a detour, we can easily make it to the valley within four hours. Why don't we wait there for the esteemed arrival of Imperial Uncle!"

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "You reap what you sow. If not for Master Tu 'taking care' of Old Traitor Lu for so many years, we would be the ones leaving with our hands empty."

Tu Xian chuckled: "It's nothing. General Teng, please lead the way."

With sky-high morale, the two hundred odd riders raced off like a gust of wind.

CHAPTER 11

Exacting Sweet Vengeance

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AT the darkest hour before dawn, a long procession of nearly three thousand human beings is entering Windstorm Valley in silence. Their only source of illumination and guidance is a few torches.

From the appearance of the procession, it is evident that these refugees are in a state of panic and disorder. Intermittently broken up into several sections, each batch of travellers are moving in an uncaring manner. Leaving the

women and children to their own devices at the back of the procession, no assistance is rendered to the fallen.

Although everybody detests Lu Buwei to the core, they are filled with sympathy at the sight before their eyes.

Xiang Shaolong pondered: "I only wish to take the life of Old Traitor Lu. Is there a way of singling Lu Buwei out from so many people?"

Xiao Yuetan coldly chortled; "Given Old Traitor Lu's self-seeking character, he would definitely be at the head of the pack."

Pointing to the front of the convoy, he indicated: "There are a few human-pulled carts. Old Traitor Lu must be inside one of them."

Xiang Shaolong instructed: "In this case, once the first batch of hundred odd individuals exit the valley, we can seal the valley with wood and stones. It'll be easier to capture him this way! Except for Old Traitor Lu, the others can go free!"

The minute Lu Buwei and his immediate group of hundred-odd refugees left the mouth of the valley, several tree trunks and countless giant boulders came crashing down suddenly from the top of a cliff. Momentarily, the area was engulfed by a huge cloud of dust and the booming noises of the falling objects shocked everyone out of their wits.

The wood and rocks that are pushed off the cliff instantly separated the procession in the most heartless manner. Falling into disarray, the refugees on both sides of the

obstruction fled for their lives in opposite directions among the cries and shouts for help.

Some of them naturally fell down and were trampled all over by their fellow travellers. It felt like the apocalypse.

For those who managed to leave the valley, they are blindly running away when scores of torches are being lighted. As two hundred Wu Family Warriors rode towards Lu Buwei from all directions, they did not harm any of the porters and followers. They simply encircled the wretched-looking Lu Buwei who is presently protected by ten odd bodyguards.

In a split second, Lu Buwei is completely surrounded and he has reached the end of his tether.

Standing in the centre of a protective circle formed by his family warriors, Lu Buwei's face is deadly pale and he is panting non-stop.

Together with Tu Xian, Xiao Yuetan, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong rode out from the crowd. Perched high up on his horse, he thundered: "Lu Buwei, years ago when you ambush my forces and murdered my wife and maids, did it ever cross your mind that there will be a day like today?"

Noticing Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan, Lu Buwei was bristling with anger and hatred. As his body shook uncontrollably, he pointed his finger at them and bellowed: "Well done! To think that I, Lu Buwei, have been treating you two with benevolence, how dare you conspire with outsiders against me."

With a 'pui', Tu Xian spat a glob of saliva on the ground. Clenching his teeth, he cursed: "Shut your smelly mouth. I should be the one using these words against you. Despite my unwavering loyalty, you chose to sacrifice my bosom buddies in order to direct suspicions away from yourself. You are not fit to be human."

Xiao Yuetan scorned: "In the face of death, you are still incorrigible and full of shameless nonsense. Today, I am personally here to witness your demise because I want to prove the justice and righteous ways of Heaven. How dare you dispute the truth and make willful accusations?"

Lu Buwei was briefly dumbfounded. Noticing the hundreds of arrows aimed at his heart and waiting to be released, he lost his tongue.

In her shrill voice, Ji Yanran admonished: "The late King has always treated you with kindness. However, you cold-bloodedly poisoned him to death. Lu Buwei, you are worse than a beast." Teng Yi roared: "The deaths of Xu Xian and Lu Gong were all because of you. Heaven must be blind for keeping you alive for the past few years."

Jing Jun instead bellowed: "You bunch of fools, are you thinking of accompanying him to his deathbed? Throw down your weapons at once and scam as far as your legs can carry you."

The family warriors exchanged glances with one another. After the first weapon is discarded, everyone disappeared in

a flash. What's left is a freshly betrayed-by-his-men Lu Buwei standing alone in the centre of their encirclement.

Xiang Shaolong and his companions leapt off their horses and advanced towards Lu Buwei.

JIANG!

Xiang Shaolong unsheathed Hundred Battle Sabre.

Within a second, his mind has experienced countless flashbacks of the most heart-wrenching moments of his life, and they are all triggered by Lu Buwei.

Chunying and her fellow maids, his trusted subordinates, one by one, they started bleeding and eventually collapsing on the ground; in the prime of her youth, Zhao's Third Princess turning into a lifeless corpse in his arms; the look of grievance in King Zhuangxiang's eyes as he passed away; Lu Gong dying with his eyes wide open, these images simultaneously recurred in his vision.

Feeling as if a huge boulder has been casted into his tranquil, mental lake, he is now overwhelmed by turbulent waves of grief.

Out of the blue, he discovered the Hundred Battle Sabre in his hand has penetrated the abdomen of Lu Buwei.

It was Lu Buwei's body that suddenly lunged forward and pierced itself against his Hundred Battle Sabre. Actually, Lu Buwei was smacked in the back by Teng Yi's Mozi Sword, causing him to stumble forward. In the ears of Xiang

Shaolong, he could hear Teng Yi praying: "Princess Qian, this is for you. May your soul in heaven be appeased."

By the time Lu Buwei slumped against the body of Xiang Shaolong, he has turned into a lifeless corpse. All the fame and fortune of the world has nothing to do with him anymore.

Although Xiang Shaolong personally killed his nemesis, his heart is feeling empty. His mind totally blank, he did not experience any joy from exacting sweet vengeance.

He has grown to detest the mutual killings of humans.

The sky is finally brightening.

After three days and two nights of continuous riding, Xiang Shaolong and his followers could not withstand the fatigue anymore. Pitching tents, they took a break.

They are one day's journey away from the farms.

During their voyage, Xiang Shaolong is extremely quiet.

That very night, the weather is excellent. Accompanied by a new crescent moon, the sky is star-studded. Spreading over the entire horizon, the stars are twinkling in clusters of varying sizes.

Leaving the campgrounds, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran ascended a small hill. Leisurely sitting back to back on a turf of grass that is tall enough to reach their knees, they soak in the ambience of genuine and deep love as husband and wife.

Xiang Shaolong started to relax. Presently, Lu Buwei's issue seems to be miles away and the threat of Xiao Pan is literally non-existent.

He suddenly recalled a movie about Qin Shihuang that he watched in the 21st century. Lu Buwei certainly did not die the way he did.

After being implicated for recommending Lao Ai into officialdom, he was stripped of his Premiership by Yingzheng and exiled to Shiyi, Henan Province.

Nonetheless, still bearing malicious intentions, Lu Buwei remains in cahoots with the rich and powerful of the six States. Eventually, he was forced by Yingzheng to move to Zhuo Jun and was served with a warning letter.

Knowing that he cannot escape the gallows, Lu Buwei chose to commit suicide by drinking poisonous wine.

However, Xiang Shaolong was obviously the one who killed Lu Buwei with his sabre. Did he unconsciously change the course of history?

In the midst of his wild reflections, Ji Yanran's shrill voice sounded beside his ear: "Hubby, a penny for your thoughts?"

In the spur of the moment, Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to make a full confession of his 'background' to his lovely wife. Ultimately, he suppressed the urge and bitterly smiled: "Even I do not know what I am thinking about."

Ji Yanran comforted: "Yanran understands Hubby's emotions. Human beings are really bizarre. Sometimes, we spare no effort and go all out to achieve a goal but once we succeeded, we would feel so empty and lost inside. Fortunately, this is not the trend for everything. For example, friendship between humans will get better with time and deeper as the days go by. Of course, there are also friends who would become your enemies!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head: "Listening to Yanran speaking is one of the greatest pleasures of my life. Being able to grow old together with Yanran at the borderlands, what more can I ask for?"

Snaking into Xiang Shaolong's bosom and using his shoulder as a pillow, Ji Yanran gazed intensively at the flickering stars in the sky with her pretty eyes. She faintly remarked: "Yesterday is the day Yingzheng becomes the official King of Qin. I wonder if Lao Ai and Empress are still... Aye... Yanran should not have brought this up."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "My virtuous wife, I do not mind it one bit. In fact, I have come to terms with it. With our limited abilities, we can only achieve so much; we cannot possibly accomplish everything we set out to do. Concerning Empress, it is beyond my powers to protect her. For the time being, my only wish is to find Wu Guo and the others safe and sound when we arrive at the farms."

Ji Yanran sighed: "Yanran also wishes to leave this place as soon as possible and never come back."

First thing next morning, everybody packed their tents and resumed their journey. Following a predetermined secret route, they rode in the direction of the farms.

As evening approaches, the farms can be sighted from afar.

Riding at the head of the convoy, Jing Jun suddenly turned back. The expression on his face is horrendous.

Knowing that something is not right, everyone started to panic.

In a deep voice, Jing Jun reported: "The farms are surrounded by multiple layers of enemies."

Under the limited glare of the moon and stars, the land is dimly illuminated. Perching on a higher elevation, they scanned the environment.

Entering their sights were tens of thousands of Qin soldiers who are laying siege at the perimeter of the farm. They are located outside the arrow firing range of the farm battlements.

Surprisingly, the battlements are in good condition. It is evident that the enemies have yet to launch an attack.

The Wu Fortress is completely dark, resembling a ferocious beast that is fast asleep.

From the side of the Qin troops, sounds of chopping wood and felling trees can be heard. Unmistakably, they are constructing war machines that are meant to attack the fortress.

In a fierce tone, Teng Yi wondered: “Logically, they should fake an attack in order to deplete our supply of arrows and wear us out physically. Why are they completely immobile instead?”

Remembering Qin Qing and the limited warriors within the fortress, Ji Yanran bit her lower lip in agitation, causing a trickle of blood to emerge. In a deep voice, she explained: “Wei Liao is waiting for our return. Luckily, they are not familiar with the terrain and did not expect us to use this secret path.”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong added: “That is not the main reason. Most importantly, he is waiting for Yingzheng to personally attack us in secret. This is the only way to prevent news from leaking out.”

After careful scrutiny, Xiao Yuetan confirmed that the entrance of the secret tunnel is situated far away from the enemies’ tents and war machine construction yard. Heaving a sigh of relief, he declared: “Before Yingzheng’s arrival, we must fully utilize whatever precious time that remains. Using the secret passageway to return to the fortress, we must immediately grab everyone and depart at once.”

Of course no one will object to his suggestion and everybody quickly jumped into action.

An hour later, they have entered the fortress without being detected. By the time Xiang Shaolong embraced Qin Qing’s petite frame, it felt as if an entire lifetime has passed by.

As the warhorses have been trained to pass through the tunnels, no noises were generated and the enemy is still in the dark about their presence.

Out of the blue, Teng Yi stammered: "What? Wu Guo and the rest are not back?"

Xiang Shaolong is badly shaken. Lightly pushing Qin Qing away, he muttered in shock: "This is impossible."

Initially speaking with Teng Yi, Tao Fang sadly conveyed: "Looks like Wu Guo is in trouble."

Pausing for a while, he added: "Last night, the enemies abruptly appeared at the perimeter of the farms. In fact, they have surrounded us and advanced towards us from all directions. Fortunately, they did not harass us; otherwise, we would be in a dilemma: Should we defend the farms with our lives or simply flee?"

With a heavy expression, Xiao Yuetan asserted: "We must retreat at once, for they will discover the secret tunnel sooner or later. When that happens, we would be trapped."

Xiang Shaolong decided: "Let's leave in batches. No matter what, I must stay put until the last minute and leave only when the enemy is finally attacking. Zhou Wei has already lost her only kin, her elder brother. I cannot allow her to lose her beloved husband too!"

Tu Xian burst out laughing: "If we must leave, let's leave together. Let this be a test of Heaven's goodwill."

Mounting the fortifications, Xiang Shaolong and the others examined the enemy formations that are spread before their eyes like a tree of fireflies.

The difference in their strengths is mind-blowing. Any resistance would be futile.

Furthermore, Xiang Shaolong and his team have been riding for days and nights. In their weakened state, engaging the adversaries can only result in defeat.

Teng Yi analyzed: "Judging from the battle formation, Wei Liao is truly a military genius."

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Yingzheng is thoroughly prepared for this assault. By deploying these border guards who are not related to Shaolong, I believe they themselves are unaware that they are attacking Wu Fortress."

At this juncture, Jing Jun ran up to them and announced: "We are all set. Shall we bring the horses to the secret cave? With them, it would be easier to make our getaway."

Ji Yanran proposed: "Why don't we place the horses near the entrance of the secret tunnel? Take it as our last effort to assist Wu Guo and the others. After all, it is better than being surrounded and without a means of escape."

Everybody kept quiet and stared at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged the wisdom of his pretty wife.

If they wanted to transport six hundred people, horses and provisions through the passageway in complete silence, they would require at least four hours.

He reluctantly agreed: "All right!"

Jing Jun left to execute his order.

Out of a sudden, Teng Yi violently shuddered: "Yingzheng is here; Wu Guo and the rest are finished."

Reeling with shock, the rest of the group followed his gaze. Together, they witnessed a never-ending procession of torches that resembles a fire dragon. From afar, these new entrants proceeded straight into the tent of the enemy General.

Xiang Shaolong conclusively barked: "Retreat at once."

DONG! DONG! DONG!

The sound of war drums echoed throughout the air.

Everyone exchanged glances with one another. Yingzheng had obviously travelled nonstop throughout the night. Without even stopping for a break or a drink, he instantly commenced the attack, clearly demonstrating his determination in killing Xiang Shaolong.

In a distressed tone, Xiang Shaolong vexed: "Xiao Pan! You are too heartless!"

Ji Yanran hollered: "Abandon the horses! We can only rely on our feet to make our escape. Otherwise, it will be too late."

Acknowledging her command, everyone started moving accordingly.

Watching the enemy soldiers advance from all directions in an overwhelming manner, their hearts sank straight to the bottom.

CHAPTER 12

At The Brink Of Death

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

BY the time the fortress gates are breached, half of Xiang Shaolong's followers have yet to enter the tunnel. Exasperated, Xiang Shaolong ordered them to squeeze themselves into the newly constructed mausoleum as a form of concealment. At the same time, he sealed the extra-thick steel double doors of the mausoleum, hoping to buy as much time as possible.

It would be ideal if Xiao Pan was misled into thinking that they had left and gave up the search.

But at the back of their minds, everyone knew that this is just their wistful thinking.

When the occupants of a huge fortress have suddenly vanished, there must be a secret passageway that will lead them out of the fortress.

If Wei Liao fails to uncover the passageway, he would not be able to account himself to the newly coronated King of Qin.

Within the mausoleum, everyone is eyeing one another with anxiety. Watching the warriors enter the secret tunnel one by one, they could faintly pick up chaotic noises of war cries and hoof beats. Despite feeling restless and agitated, as if their hearts are on fire, they could only put their trust in the Will of Heaven.

Sounds of 'LONG! LONG!' resounded continuously. Apparently, the invaders are breaking down doors and conducting a search.

PONG!

Right before their eyes, the steel door is finally being hammered. The evil clutches of the enemy has ultimately found its way to this place.

After a round of pointless bashing, silence enveloped the mausoleum.

The hearts of Xiang Shaolong's followers are now stuck at their throats and they are having difficulty breathing.

They could easily predict the next move of the enemy. By tying a large log to a cart, the enemies can fashion a battering ram and use it to break the door down.

The next fifteen minutes felt like a century.

Putting themselves at the back of the queue, Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Tu Xian and ten odd Wu Family Special Forces members are armed with their crossbows, ready to defend the mausoleum with their lives. By holding back the enemies, more of their compatriots can make it to safety.

No one is in the mood to talk.

At this juncture, besides them, there are about thirty followers who had yet to enter the secret passageway.

Fortunately, during the early days of construction, special attention was being paid to the tunnel ventilation. Otherwise, with so many people crammed in the tunnel, they would suffocate to death before reaching the exit.

Xiang Shaolong unconsciously glanced upwards at the center of the tall worshiping altar. Gazing at the ancestral tablet of Xiao Pan's birth mother Lady Ni, he resentfully smiled to himself. He thought: Ni'er, did this ever cross your mind; that one day, I, Xiang Shaolong, will be personally killed in cold blood by your beloved son.

HONG!

The entire mausoleum shook once but the steel doors remained intact.

HONG!

The three steel door fasteners that are securing the steel doors started to bend inwards and there is now a gap between the double doors. Through the gap, the light from fire torches can be seen and the battle cries are even more realistic than before. Like waves hitting the shore, the enemy soldiers are shouting incessantly into the mausoleum.

Luckily, by this time, Xiang Shaolong and his companions are the only ones who are left in the mausoleum. The rest of them have entered the tunnels.

Xiang Shaolong bellowed: "Get in! Quick!"

Of course nobody dare to be sluggish. Like bees returning to their nests, everybody scrambled for the tunnels.

Before they could replace the steel cover for the secret tunnel, a giant HONG! sound rang out. Both the enormous steel doors collapsed onto the ground, taking with them part of the brick walls. Momentarily, the mausoleum is shrouded with dust.

The four individuals Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran stood guard by the tunnel entrance, ready to kill whoever that trespasses.

They had to do this.

Presently, the tunnel is filled with people. If the enemies begin to pursue them from the back, everyone would be slaughtered.

The more they can delay the enemy and prevent them from understanding the tunnel layout, the greater chances of survival the others would have.

The light from a fire torch is shining down the tunnel.

Xiang Shaolong and the others stepped backwards, avoiding the illumination of the torch.

A man excitedly shouted: "The entrance is here! They did not even have enough time to put the steel cover back."

Xiang Shaolong and the others groaned to themselves. Out of the blue, beyond the passageway, the entire mausoleum became completely silent.

Next, sounds of kneeling and paying of respects is heard.

Although Xiang Shaolong and his companions are itching with curiosity, they are equally terrified. However, there is nothing they can do.

This man must be Wei Liao.

Yingzheng is amazingly quiet.

POK!

That was the sound of someone kneeling down.

From the edge of the tunnel entrance, Li Si's quivering voice sounded: "Great King, please have mercy!"

Wei Liao was astonished: "Chief Officer?"

What followed was another round of mysterious silence.

Wei Liao's voice sounded again: "Great King, please give the order at once. Otherwise, if we miss this opportunity, it will be lost forever."

He then dryly coughed once and wondered: "Why is Great King staring at the worshiping altar and the ancestral tablets?"

In the hearts of Xiang Shaolong and the other three, an indescribable feeling is beginning to emerge. Xiao Pan must be quietly gazing at the tablet of his beloved mother Lady Ni.

Except for the four of them, the others should have crossed the halfway point of the tunnel. In another thirty minutes, the evacuation would be complete.

Nonetheless, if Xiao Pan takes up Wei Liao's suggestion, everybody will still end up dead.

The familiar voice of Xiao Pan finally sounded: "Official Wei and the others, Guaren hereby command that you retreat from this room at once. Only Official Li shall remain."

Wei Liao was stunned: "Great King..."

Xiao Pan roared: "Get out!"

The sound of footsteps was heard.

Once his soldiers are out of earshot, Xiao Pan questioned in a deep voice: "How can we prevent the world from talking about this incident?"

Li Si answered: "After Great King has conquered the six States and united the lands, Great King can issue a

nationwide decree, prohibiting anyone from mentioning the three words: Xiang Shaolong. Violators will be beheaded at once. This would certainly make everyone stop talking about him and the problem will be resolved accordingly.”

Xiao Pan coldly hissed: “If they did not talk about him but recorded him in historical documents, what should we do?”

Li Si replied: “Great King can burn their books and bury the authors alive.”

Below them, Xiang Shaolong is absolutely flabbergasted, never expecting himself to be the reason for Qin Shihuang to burn books and bury scholars alive. Concurrently, he realizes that the burning of the Book of Wu Pu is to deny the public of valuable knowledge.

Xiao Pan grilled: “Nevertheless, how should we explain the killing of Lu Buwei by Xiang Shaolong?”

His voice becoming louder, Li Si proclaimed: “It is really simple. The explanation is: To escape punishment, Lu Buwei fled back to his territory of Shiyi where he eventually committed suicide by drinking poisonous wine.”

Footsteps sounded again and someone came to the edge of the tunnel entrance.

After a short spell of silence, Xiao Pan’s voice lightly expressed: “Master! May you have a safe journey!”

Following that, Xiao Pan decisively thundered: “Retreat at once!”

The footsteps trailed off.

Unable to hold back any longer, the hot tears of Xiang Shaolong overflowed his eye sockets.

In his heart, he could feel the immense agitation of creating a crucial episode of history.

The minute Xiao Pan steps out of his mother's mausoleum, he would no longer be the Zhao Xiao Pan from Handan.

Because he would have completely severed his past and become a true blue Yingzheng. In the future, all his energies will be expended on the grand scheme of conquering the world.

The instance he crosses the fallen steel doors, the six States are destined to be eliminated one after another.

Their opponent is the unshakable super conqueror – the founder of China, the bearer of the title: One in a millennium Emperor, Qin Shihuang Yingzheng.

Recomposing their emotions, Xiang Shaolong and his companions caught up to the main body by going through and exiting the tunnel. To their astonishment, they spotted Wu Guo and the Guardians among them.

It turned out that they were forced to take the roads after Lord Changwen barricaded the river route. As a result, they ended up arriving several hours after Yingzheng. Coincidentally, they ran into the others near the tunnel exit.

At the same time, Wu Guo brought updates from Wang Jian. Lao Ai was sentenced to death by having his body torn apart by five carriages and the two sons of Zhu Ji and Lao Ai were burnt alive.

Zhu Ji herself was escorted back to Xianyang.

Of course everyone knows that the real Zhu Ji is dead. The Zhu Ji that is returning to Xianyang and subsequently placed under house arrest is merely an imposter conjured by Yingzheng.

After the withdrawal of Yingzheng's massive army, everyone returned to the farms and mounted their horses before leaving again.

Xiang Shaolong did not forget to bring along the ancestral tablets of Zhao Qian, Lady Ni and the other ladies.

Three months later, they finally arrived safely at the borderlands, fulfilling their long awaited dream.

CHAPTER 13

United States of China

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AS the rebellion forces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are mainly staffed by foreigners from the six States, coupled with Zhengguo Canal being exposed as a trick by Han to destroy Qin, on top of Yingzheng's worry that the foreigners from the six States will continue to propagate 'rumours', Yingzheng implemented an 'anti foreigner' policy despite the mounting protests from his officials, instantly endangering foreign guests from the eastern States.

Li Si is fully conscious that he knows too much for his own good. Nonetheless, he is highly supportive of Yingzheng's dream to unite the States. At the risk of his life, he submitted the following report:

"When subordinate heard that the Court of Qin has decided to implement anti-foreigner policies, I felt that this move in inappropriate! In the past, Duke Lao was seeking talent. From the west, he recruited You Yu from Rong; east, Baili Xi from Wan; welcomed Jian Shu from Song; and embraced Pei Bao and Gongsun Zi from Jing. None of these five men are originally from Qin but with their support, Duke Lao was able to occupy more than twenty States, forming the Kingdom of West Rong.

Using the laws of Shang Yang, Duke Xiao reformed local customs and manners, causing the population to greatly flourish and the country to grow rich and powerful. The population rejoiced, and the feudal lords were subjugated. Obtaining experts from Wei and Chu, they gained sway over thousands of miles of land, and to this day their governance was strong.

King Hui used the stratagems of Zhang Yi and seized the three river plains areas. In the west, he consolidated the states of Ba and Shu. In the north, he governed Shangjun, while in the south he took over Hanzhong. He embraced the nine barbarian tribes, and regulated Yan and Shao. He seized the dangerous passes to the east, which were easy to guard and made them hard to attack, cutting off the fertile land. He dispersed the alliance of the Six Eastern Powers, and

made the west solely dominated by Qin. His accomplishments persisted to this very day.

Enlisting the help of Fan Wei, King Zao promoted him to the position of Marquis Xiang and disposed of Hua Yang, thereby strengthening the court administration and weed out corruption. By eradicating the feudal lords, King Zao is able to consolidate his authority.

The success of these four kings is undeniably linked to their reliance on foreign talents.

Regardless of perspective, these foreign advisors did not disappoint!

If the opposite had happened, for example, the four kings condemned these foreigners to lowly positions and did not exploit their capabilities, Qin will not stand to gain from their expertise and can never be as strong as today.

Additionally, this policy is not carefully researched and there is no distinction between truth and fiction. There is no basis to discriminate between citizens and non-citizens of Qin. Ultimately, the emphasis should be on genuine talent and not nationality. Thus, this policy is flawed."

From the frank and open assessment that Li Si had presented, besides exhibiting his undying loyalty to Yingzheng, it clearly elaborates ironclad truths and facts.

Finally, Yingzheng retracted his decree and abolished the 'anti foreigner' policy.

At the same time, Han Fei, the old friend of Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran, was forcefully invited to Qin.

However, his loyalty lies with his birth State and he spoke up for Han on several occasions. Due to his ineloquence, he failed to get into the good books of Yingzheng. Eventually, he offended Yao Jia and Li Si, and with the two men jealous of his talent, Han Fei was poisoned to death in prison.

After eradicating Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, Yingzheng consolidated his authority over Qin and subsequently began his conquest of the other six States.

Alone by themselves, none of the six States can withstand the might of Qin.

But if they worked in hand in hand, it is not impossible to give Qin a run for their money. For example, six years after Yingzheng's coronation, Qin suffered a crushing defeat against the allied forces of Chu and the Three States. However, Han Chuang was down on his luck and perished during the skirmish.

Without Lu Buwei backing him, Tian Dan lost power. From then on, there are no more distinguished talents from Qi.

Learning his lesson the hard way, Yingzheng switched to employing strategies recommended by Li Si and Wei Liao. In an intricate manner, he exploited the three methods of bribery, sowing of discord and divide and conquer to destroy the six States.

Fourteen years into Yingzheng's reign, King An of Han was the first to yield to Qin. The next year, the armies of Qin embarked on a killing spree and conquered Han.

Personally trained by Xiang Shaolong, Heng Qi (Huan Qi) was promoted to Great General after accumulating a ton of merits. Unfortunately, he pitted himself against Li Mu, the gifted general who devastated the army of Xiang Shaolong. After incurring huge losses at He Fei and ashamed to face Yingzheng, Heng Qi fled to Yan.

Finally, it has boiled down to a war between the two renowned generals Wang Jian and Li Mu.

Under the leadership of Wang Jian and Yang Duanhe, the armies of Qin launched a massive campaign against Zhao. Meeting them outside Handan City, Li Mu engaged their forces and their fights resulted in a deadlock. Bewitched by Li Si's sowing of discord, Guo Kai went to the extent of persuading the King of Zhao to switch Li Mu with another general. Refusing to accept the switch, Li Mu was executed by the King of Zhao.

With the passing of a giant, there are no generals in Zhao who could stand up to Wang Jian. Like a gust of strong wind sweeping the fallen leaves, the armies of Qin swept Zhao into the memories of history.

After Yingzheng ruled for nineteen years, Prince Dan sent Jingke into Qin and tried to assassinate him. Failing in his mission, Jingke was mutilated and killed.

Finding a reason to counterattack, Yingzheng dispatched Wang Jian to Yan. After soundly defeating the armies of Yan at the west of River Yi, the next year, Wang Jian occupied Ji, the capital of Yan and killed Prince Dan.

With his son Wang Ben, Wang Jian went on to dominate more than ten cities of Chu. The next year, Wang Jian demonstrated his legendary abilities once again. By breaking a dam and flooding Daliang, he effortlessly erases Wei off the map of China.

Twenty three years into Yingzheng's reign, Wang Jian began invading Chu and inflicted heavy casualties to the army of Chu at Pingyu. The next year, Meng Wu successfully overran Shouchun. The King of Chu and Li Yuan ended up as prisoners of war while Li Yanyan committed suicide by poisoning herself, heralding the demise of Chu.

Twenty six years after Yingzheng became the King of Qin, Wang Ben breached the defenses of Lin Zi. Tian Jian, the King of Qi, surrendered unconditionally.

From this point onwards, the vanquished six States are like a cloud of dissipating smoke. At the end of the day, all their lands are now part of Qin.

Recollecting Xiang Shaolong's suggested caption of 'Shihuang Emperor', Yingzheng instructed his officials to evaluate the feasibility of this title now that he has united the whole of China.

Everyone is naturally full of praise and approval.

Therefore, Yingzheng gave himself the title of Shihuang Emperor. Removing the structure of marquises and lords, Yingzheng divided China into thirty six provinces. Confiscating all the weapons of China to safeguard himself, Yingzheng also constructed twelve golden statues in his likeness to remind the people of his authority. At the same time, he standardized the weights and measurement, road widths and carriage sizes of China. Yingzheng is also responsible for issuing a single currency for the whole country and deciding the language medium for all forms of communication. Finally, he resettled the richest one hundred and twenty thousand households to Xianyang

Indirectly, he has established the model for the future of China.

When Yingzheng ascends the Emperor throne as Shihuang Emperor, the majestic Huai Qing Platform is simultaneously being constructed.

The common folks are under the impression that their Emperor is building this to commemorate Widow Qing.

Only those in the know like Li Si and Wang Jian are aware that Yingzheng is actually building it to commemorate Xiang Shaolong who is far away from the Central Plains.

EPILOGUE

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

UNDER the flying hooves of the horse, the ground rapidly fades towards the back.

With three of his brothers Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi and Jing Jun, Xiang Shaolong is riding at full speed on the fresh and crisp grassland that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Under the blue sky and white clouds, about half a mile in front of them, a herd of nearly one thousand wild horses are startled and instantly fled towards the north.

The four men started shouting. Squeezing the abdomen of their horses to change directions, they continued the pursuit.

Xiang Shaolong and his fellow riders divided themselves into two teams.

One team started flanking the wild horses from the side, forcing the leading alpha horse to change their flight path while the other team persisted in hounding the horses from the back.

After a short chase, the herd is intimidated by their horsewhips and had no choice but to jump into the river and swim towards the opposite shore.

Reining his horse to a stop, Xiang Shaolong thundered: "Kids! It is time to display your talents."

On the opposite shore, more than a hundred men suddenly appeared with ropes in their hands, enthusiastically waiting for the horses to walk right into their arms. Among them are Wu Guo, Wu Yan Zhe, Zhao Da and Liu Chao.

Observing his brothers and men capturing wild horses with plenty of excitement, Xiang Shaolong praised: "First Brother is truly talented in picking a good territory. This location comprises of countless rivers and streams which is useful for farming and drinking. With bountiful water supply, fertile soil and limitless grazing grass, this is a piece of paradise."

His eyes scanning the endless fields around him, Wu Guo inhaled a breath of fragrant grass smell and chuckled:

“When I first came here, I did not feel good because I have this impression that we are forced to come here, like a self-imposed exile. But after living here for so many years, only death can force me to leave this place.”

Jing Jun suddenly barked to the men on the opposite shore: “That pure white horse! I want that pure white horse!”

Teng Yi was tickled: “This fellow, Dan’er has given him three sons and two daughters and yet, he himself is like a kid who has never grown up.”

At evening time, the men are satisfied with a rewarding day and started riding back to the hunting camp.

Ji Yanran, Qin Qing, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian Feng, Zhou Wei, Shan Lan, Lu Dan’er and the other ladies are sitting on a slope, overlooking a group of more than thirty boys and girls aged between ten and fifteen years old. The children are riding their horses and playing polo on a grass meadow.

The air is filled with laughter.

One of the children is Xiang Bao’er.

He is much more brawny compared to the other kids. Wearing a beautiful cap made from eagle feathers, coupled with his thick brows and large eyes, he is already an outstanding character.

At this moment, he happened to bend down from his horse and use his mallet to dribble the ball. Under his skillful maneuvers, no one could snatch the polo ball from him.

Beneath their feet, like a shimmering green carpet, the boundless grass prairie seems to extend all the way to heaven.

A distance away, more than a hundred tents are clustered together. As the smoke rises from the cooking stoves, more than ten ladies are starting a fire and preparing a meal for their husbands and sons to enjoy later.

Nearby, the two men Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan are sitting on the ground and chatting idly with each other. Occasionally, they would throw a glance at the polo-playing children.

The game is now reaching a point of excitement and the spectating ladies clapped and cheered nonstop. Among them, Wu Tingfang and Lu Dan'er cheered the loudest.

Out of the blue, Qin Qing nudged Ji Yanran who is sitting down beside her. She joyfully exclaimed: "Hubby is back."

Shifting their gaze to the edge of the horizon, the group of ladies spotted more than a hundred black dots that are gradually becoming bigger and bigger. The sound of hoof beats is also faintly discernable.

Feeling in the mood, Ji Yanran stood up and hollered in her shrill voice: "I am going out to welcome our victorious warriors; who is with me?"

The children have already abandoned their game. With some of them riding ahead and some riding at the back, they are heading towards the approaching horsemen.

The sound of hoof beats reverberated thorough the air.

Ji Yanran's invitation is instantly taken up by everyone. Running to and mounting their horses, it wasn't too long until the ladies met up with their partners on the grasslands. Together, they rode back to camp.

Riding in front, the children are proudly leading the way back.

Slowing cantering beside Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, an emotional Xiang Shaolong gushed: "Heaven is indeed kind to us. In the past, I cannot imagine myself leading such a blissful and worry-free life."

Qin Qing sighed: "Because of our past experiences, we are able to appreciate the value of living freely on the grasslands. Unlike that little fellow Bao'er; he kept whining and expressed his desire to return to the Central Plains and see the world."

Wu Tingfang nagged: "In the future, you better not tell him any more stories about the Central Plains, especially about Chu. Bao'er has developed a liking for that place, how mysterious!"

Xiang Shaolong chortled: "Every person has his or her own dreams. Because our dreams are fulfilled, we are contented with our lives. Bao'er is merely pursuing his dream! We should never try to stop him from pursuing his interests and must never force him to live according to our expectations of him."

Ji Yanran is exhilarated: "Hubby's words are really moving. Bao'er's dream is to become an eagle in the sky, able to spread his wings and fly to any place he desires."

Zhao Zhi guffawed: "Everyone is pampering him without any reservations! In my opinion, Little Zhen and Little Feng are the worst culprits!"

Teased by Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng are covering their mouths and giggling. Happiness is written all over their faces.

As if she suddenly remembered something, Ji Yanran smiled: "I nearly forgot to tell you something, Father of Bao'er. Bao'er finds his name too childish and wishes to change it."

Unconcerned, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: "As long as his surname is Xiang, he can choose whichever name he wants."

Pretending to be angry, Wu Tingfang protested: "The name Bao'er is my suggestion; it is his birth name!"

Ji Yanran continued: "Noting his love for eagles, I recommended him to use the name Eagle (Ying)."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "Xiang Ying! That's quite a nice name!"

Qin Qing gently rebuked: "As a father, you do not understand your son well enough. He finds the word 'Eagle' too aggressive and beast-like. Moreover, others will make jokes about his name. He has decided on the word: Yu."

Violently shaken, Xiang Shaolong reined his horse to a stop and unconsciously shouted: "What!"

The ladies, Teng Yi and the rest were stunned into stopping with him. All the attention is now focused on Xiang Shaolong.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing wave after wave of tsunamis.

Xiang Yu?

Isn't he the man who fought against Liu Bang for control over the entire China? And who eventually committed suicide by jumping into River Wu with the beauty Yu Ji? The one and only Chu Great Conqueror Xiang Yu?

What is going on?

Could it be merely a coincidence in their names?

Taking time into account, the probability is quite strong.

From the records of history, the Qin dynasty ended after two emperors.

Thirty seven years after Yingzheng became the King of Qin, he died of illness at Saqiu when he was touring the southern provinces. After him, the second Emperor perished three years later. At that point in time, Xiang Shaolong's son Xiang Yu is in his early thirties, the prime of his youth.

The cries of everybody brought Xiang Shaolong back to his senses.

Ji Yanran suspiciously probed: "Does Hubby dislike this name? But Bao'er loves it. If you want him to change his mind, leave us out of it. You can speak to him directly."

Recomposing himself, Xiang Shaolong started contemplating. Should he issue a warning to his son Xiang Bao'er? For example, when Bao'er meets a man named Liu Bang, he should unsheathe his sword and kill him at once.

But on the other hand, even though Xiang Shaolong is fully aware of historical developments, at the end of the day, he is unable to change its path.

Destiny is something that cannot be altered by mere willpower and effort.

Humans believe they are charting their lives; that is precisely because they are unaware of their actual fate. In fact, they are simply living their lives according to fate.

Only Xiang Shaolong is able to fully comprehend this insight.

One of his 'son' Xiao Pan built the Great Qin empire while his other 'son' Xiang Yu personally destroyed the same empire.

Qin Qing frowned: "What is Hubby thinking about!"

Abruptly breaking out into laughter, Xiang Shaolong replied: "I have thought through it and came to an understanding."

Teng Yi's voice sounded: "What did Third Brother understand?"

Xiang Shaolong joyfully exclaimed: "From this day onwards, Xiang Bao'er shall be Xiang Yu."

The crowd rolled their eyes in unison.

With a baffled expression, Ji Yanran enquired: “What is there to understand about changing one’s name?”

From her back, Xiang Shaolong leaned forward to her face and inhaled her fragrance. He laughed: “I understood one point. If you succeeded, so what? And if you failed, so what? Success and failure are irrelevant. The most important thing is to lead a fulfilling and extraordinary life, inscribing your everlasting name in the records of history. That indeed, is a life worth living!”

Even more puzzled than before, the crowd could never guess that he is referring to his own son eventually becoming the legendary and illustrious Chu Great Conqueror Xiang Yu.

Letting out a burst of heroic laughter, Xiang Shaolong prodded his horse and started chasing up to Xiang Yu and the other children.

Everyone swiftly resounded and nudged their horses in pursuit.

Under the magnificent and colourful sunset, the humans and horses seemed to have merged into one body with Mother Nature, depicting a heavenly and ecstatic painting.

[The End]

ABOUT AUTHOR

HUANG YI's real name is Huang Zuciang (Chinese: 黃易) (Penname Huang An/Huang Yi) is a Chinese writer of Wuxia novels. He graduated from the Department of Fine Arts of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and once worked as the Assistant Chairperson of Hong Kong Museum of Art.

In the 1990s, after the golden age of Wuxia literature, Wuxia literature was increasingly under attack by the general public and was losing its previous aura. However, the emergence of Huang Yi infused new life into the Wuxia genre.



From *Lethal Weapons of Love and Passion* (Chinese: 覆雨翻云) to *A Step Into The Past* (Chinese: 寻秦记) and to the now popular *Twin of Brothers* (Chinese: 大唐双龙传), Huang Yi has combined science fiction with traditional Chinese culture (metaphysics, philosophy, etc) to create a new style of work. Currently, his popularity has resulted in some people describing this phenomenon as flurry of Huang sweeping through China.

Upon conclusion of his longest novel, *Da Tang Shuang Long Zhuan* (*Twins of Brothers*), Huang Yi has commented that he would like to follow in the footstep of Louis Cha and to revise and improve his released novels.

Source:
Wikipedia.org

LIST OF AUTHOR'S NOVELS

(This list is based on a list found at shuku.net dated 15 March 2010)

NO	TITLE	PUBLISHER (YEAR)	REMARKS
----	-------	------------------	---------

SERIES:

• YI XIA

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| 1 | 大唐双龙记 (Da Tang Shuang Long Ji) | | |
| | Twin of Brothers | | |
| 2 | 寻秦记 (Xun Qin Ji) | Wong Yi Books (2001) | |
| | A Step Into The Past | | |
| 3 | 大剑师传奇 (Da Jian Shi Chuan Qi) | | |
| 4 | 星际浪子 (Xing Ji Lang Zi) | | |
| | Wanderer of the Cosmos | | |
| 5 | 荆楚争雄记 (Jing Chu Zheng Xiong Ji) | | |
| 6 | 覆雨翻云 (Fu Yu Fan Yun) | | |
| | Lethal Weapons of Love and Passion | | |

• LING DU YU

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|--|--|
| 7 | 月魔 (Yue Mo) | | |
| 8 | 上帝之谜 (Shang Di Zhi Mi) | | |
| 9 | 兽性回归 (Shou Xing Hui Gui) | | |
| 10 | 诸神之战 (Zhu Shen Zhi Zhan) | | |
| 11 | 光神 (Guang Shen) | | |
| 12 | 圣女 (Sheng Ru) | | |
| 13 | 湖祭 (Hu Ji) | | |
| 14 | 尔国临格 (Er Guo Lin Ge) | | |
| 15 | 浮沉之主 (Fu Chen Zhi Zhu) | | |

• PO SUI XU KONG

16 破碎虚空 (Po Sui Xu Kong)

• **XUAN HUAN**

17 灵琴杀手 (Ling Qin Sha Shou)

18 超脑 (Chao Nao)

19 超级战士 (Chao Ji Zhan Shi)

20 时空浪族 (Shi Kong Lang Zu)

21 文明之秘 (Wen Ming Zhi Mi)

22 域外天魔 (Yu Wai Tian Mo)

23 幽灵船 (You Ling Chuan)

24 龙神 (Long Shen)

NON SERIES:

25 情约 (Qing Yao)

26 迷失的 (Mi Shi Di)

27 异灵 (Yi Ling)

28 魔女殿 (Mo Nu Dian)

29 同归于尽 (Tong Gui Yu Jin)

30 乐王 (Yue Wang)

31 创世纪 (Chuang Shi Ji)

32 异能警察 (Yin Eng Jing Cha)

33 换天 (Huan Tian)

34 蝶梦 (Die Meng)

35 最后战士 (Zui Hou Zhan Shi)

36 故乡 (Gu Xiang)

37 惊世大预言 (Jing Shi Da Yu Yan)

38 乌金血剑 (Wu Jin Xue Jian)

39 天子传奇 (Tian Zi Chuan Qi)

40 寻鼎记 (Xun Ding Ji)

- 41 边荒传说 (Bian Huang Chuan Shuo)
Wasteland Legend